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The Anvil

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THE ANVIL

THE ANVIL

BY
GUSTAV FRENSSEN

TRANSLATED BY
HUNTLEY PATERSON

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THE ANVIL

CHAPTER I

Early Days

I WAS born on the west coast of Schleswig-Holstein, at a spot where the high ground stretches right up to the sea, and probably the first sight that met my eyes, when I looked across the road outside our house, was the vast sweep of waters beneath our windows. For our village lay in a fairly high and exposed position upon a group of hills. The houses were scattered about without any semblance of order, as if they had been washed up by the storms and left to stand where chance had dropped them.

Our little village was called Stormfeld; and I always think it was well named, for I can hardly remember a day entirely free from a blustering wind.

The house in which I was born was small and low-ceilinged, with a roof of large Dutch pantiles. It consisted of two small rooms and a kitchen, occupied by ourselves and my father's assistant, and of a blacksmith's forge—a fairly large and lofty place, the floor of which seemed to sink down on one side. It was always smothered in coal-dust, littered with scraps of iron of all shapes and sizes, and very dark except where the fire glowed about the bellows. In the darkest corner a special staircase, with very small shallow steps, which my father had made on purpose for me, apparently under the misapprehension that I should remain a child or a dwarf all my life, led to an exceedingly small, low-ceilinged room, on the outside of which, above the large doors of the forge, there was a little balcony. My father was a visionary, especially in regard to me. I was his only child, and he loved me more than anything in the world. He was convinced that I should one day do something great, and he had the strange notion that a balcony was the best and most edifying adornment for a respectable house, and that I could do nothing better than stand on it as often as possible. But in building it he forgot that the perpetual clouds of smoke and steam that issued from the doors of the forge and smothered the balcony made it as a rule quite unusable. However, he was delighted with his handiwork. How well I remember his cheerful, keen young face and his long fair hair as he looked up from his work on a wagon, a plough, or a horse to catch a glimpse of my tiny figure, perched up there in the smoke, which always made me cough a little! I can only hope I went up there often, and always looked proud and happy, so that he got all the pleasure he deserved.

The family of Babendiek had long resided in these parts, and had a strange and marvellous history. My father, who was deeply interested in everything connected with the spirit and soul of man, carefully investigated all the old family legends, and was always very happy and proud when he discovered anything fresh.

He knew that about a hundred and fifty years back a branch of the family had migrated and settled in one of the small towns on the west coast, where it had risen to a position of honour and importance. But all connection with this branch had ceased at least seventy years before his time. One day, however, while reading the newspaper, his eye happened to catch the name of Councillor Mumm of Ballum, deputy mayor of the town and a well-known art connoisseur. And on examining his family records my father came to the conclusion that this man must certainly be a distant relative. He had no idea what a deputy mayor, still less what an art connoisseur, could be; but no doubt he regarded him as an exceedingly distinguished and imposing personality, especially as he was connected with the arts—and his fancy immediately began to spin golden threads between this great man and myself.

Pursuing his inquiries further, he discovered that another member of the family was a dean of the Church, living in a large village in Holstein. And once again my dear father's mind was filled with the most wonderful visions and plans. A dean!

For the first three years of their married life my parents remained childless. When, however, in the fourth year, I began to announce my arrival, my father's imagination immediately conjured up the most glorious future for me. He was quite certain that the child would be a boy with no ordinary career before him; the only doubtful point seemed to be whether I should be a great scholar, a great inventor, the first man to fly to Mars, or what. I lost my father too early to be able to form a just opinion of him, but I don't believe a greater visionary ever lived, with an imagination more full of bright and airy fancies.

He had evidently long made up his mind to ask our distant though distinguished relatives to be godfathers to the child he was expecting, probably with the mystical idea of setting the bright light of a loftier calling before me at the very dawn of life. But he did not dare to explain this to my mother; for, with all her kindness, her nature was more sombre and less sanguine than his. Once when he hinted at the idea, she looked at him with her clever, dark, supercilious eyes and told him to drink a glass of water and go to the doctor. But she did not really mean to be hard.

So my father had no alternative but to discuss the question with his assistant, Engel Tiedje; and with this name I come to one of the leading characters in my story. Engel Tiedje was born in a workhouse somewhere, but as he never said anything about it I don't know which it was. He had been a straight, sturdy child, with very short legs; but the tale went that, as a lad on a farm, he had been put to excessively heavy work, with the result that he was deformed for life. Later on he had become a blacksmith, and, as this strenuous work had bent him more than ever, he was now no taller than a boy of twelve; but he was very broad, his back was badly humped, and his mighty arms reached almost to his knees. In his great broad head, with its wild shock of hair, sunk deep between his shoulders, two small dark eyes gleamed shyly. He had worked for years with various other blacksmiths, and had been with my father ever since the latter had taken over the village forge. He loved my father's sunny, imaginative nature, while for my mother, who for three years had been head of the village school and had read all kinds of old books on healing and magic, he had the profoundest respect.

My father therefore discussed the matter with him. As he was already in failing health, he merely plied the bellows, handed Tiedje the tongs, and performed other light duties, while his assistant hammered the glowing iron with his mighty arms. He spoke in low tones, wondering what the little Christian child that was expected would look like, saying that every human soul born into this world was divine, and that its parents, relatives, and friends should regard it as a sacred duty to guide its feet along a pure and sinless path. Engel Tiedje nodded at each word his master uttered. Their thoughts soared higher and higher, and it would have been no matter of surprise to either if the crooked old black door had flown open of its own accord and a heavenly host had entered to inquire whether the expected child had yet arrived at the smithy. Stirred and inspired by their lofty thoughts, the two discussed the letter which was to be written to the great councillor of Ballum and to the dean; and when they were more or less agreed on all points, my father leant across the blacksmith's bench, and in low tones took turns with Engel Tiedje in composing the letter. But he kept a somewhat anxious eye on the kitchen door; for on the other side my mother was preparing the evening meal.

Owing to my father's limited experience in correspondence, the letter, which was couched in the phraseology of the Bible and of an old guide to letter-writing, began by reviewing the somewhat legendary origin of the Babendiek family, including its name, proceeded to show its relationship to Councillor Mumm of Ballum, and the dean who lived at Buchholz, and invited them, on the strength of this relationship, to be my godfathers. But in anticipation of his hopes, my father actually described me, though I had not yet been born, as a fair-haired, intelligent child, with the loftiest aspirations. He said that he certainly did not expect them to come all the way to the forge, which he confessed was a humble and modest abode, mentioned the balcony on which he was still working, and signed himself the happy father, Hermann Babendiek, Master Blacksmith of Stormfeld.

This letter, which, owing to the conditions under which it was written, had become rather grimy, was carefully placed in an envelope and consigned to the chest of drawers in Engel Tiedje's room, so that my mother should not see it. Engel was to drop it in the post on the day of my birth. But the two scribes were so proud of their composition, and referred so repeatedly and enthusiastically to its possible success and its bearing on my future, that Engel Tiedje, too impatient to wait, and forgetting that I was not yet born, posted the letter three days after it had been written.

But no sooner was this done than the two men began to feel terribly guilty. All their ambitious schemes suddenly looked like being shattered. What if I were not a boy? Would I be born in three days or three months? They even began to doubt whether I should be born at all, and grew almost sick with fear. They ceased to mention the letter, could not look each other in the face while at work, and, trying to behave as if nothing had happened, hoped from hour to hour with beating hearts that I might make my appearance as soon as possible.

Ten days after the posting of the letter Steenkarken, the nearest small town, held its annual fair, and my father, who was accustomed to attend with a cart heaped up with every kind of iron implement that country people could require, made preparations to go.

My mother reminded him that her hour might come while he was away. But he could not resist the attractions of the fair, especially as his uneasy conscience about the letter also probably urged him to seek distraction. So he harnessed our neighbour's pony to his cart and drove away. Engel Tiedje returned to the forge, thrust a bent ploughshare into the fire, and, also wishing to silence his uneasy conscience, whistled the air of some popular ditty quite out of keeping with his nature. My mother cleared the breakfast things away, sat down at the window for a while, as she often did in the morning, and glanced at one of her books of old cures, spells, and magic nostrums. She had inherited both her interest in these matters and the books relating to them from her grandmother, who had hailed from the marshes, and although she was still a young woman her advice was much sought after by our neighbours.

As she sat there she suddenly felt that her hour was at hand. I believe she must have been somewhat unpractical, for she had failed to warn either the midwife or any neighbour that she might need help, and was obliged to drag herself to the kitchen and to the door leading to the forge.

Engel Tiedje was busy in a corner looking for some implement. She told him to fetch the midwife, and then dragged herself back to her bedroom, undressed with difficulty, and, getting into bed, waited for help to come.

As it happened the midwife was not at home. Like almost everybody else in the village, she had gone to Steenkarken Fair.

When Engel Tiedje returned from his fruitless errand, desperate and at his wits' end—"my eyes were upside down in my head!" he used to assure me—he found a fine large carriage standing in front of our door. A fat coachman sat on the box, and inside were two young women. One was tall, dark, and stiff, and the other was round, very fair, and very lively—"all milk and blood." The dark one remained seated in the carriage, but the fair one stepped out and with an attractive air went up to the door of the house.

Engel Tiedje knew at once what this meant, and the little presence of mind he had left immediately vanished. Giving the carriage as wide a berth as possible, and looking up at the sky—"as if I were trying to catch swallows, Otto"—he endeavoured to get back into the forge, where, as he subsequently related, he intended to hide under the bench.

But at that moment the pretty fair woman saw him, and, turning towards him, asked him in her beautiful, provocative voice, "Hi, little man! Here! Are you the master?"

Engel Tiedje was so shocked by the suggestion that he dropped speechless upon a carriage frame lying in front of the forge. Then in anxious tones and with a catch in his breath he replied that he was not.

"Well," exclaimed the fair one, "I must honestly confess I am thankful for that!"

"I say . . . Lena!" expostulated the stiff dark woman.

"Oh, Sarah, for heaven's sake let me say what I want to! Where is the master, then, my dear friend?"

Engel replied that my father was at Steenkarken Fair, and on being asked where the mistress and her child were he sank his dishevelled head so deep between his broad, round shoulders that he suddenly looked as if he had three heads. "There was a little mistake," he said, "about that letter. . . . The child is not there yet; it is only going to be born now." Whereupon, as though he had done with the world, he dropped on to the shaft of a wagon close by.

The pretty fair one opened her fine fiery eyes wider than ever, and, clasping her hands in front of her, exclaimed: "Well, if that isn't enough to give one the pip!"

"I say . . . Lena!"

"Oh, whatever's the matter, Sarah? If anything could give one the pip, surely it's this. . . . The child is not even born yet!"

"It is scandalous!" cried the tall dark woman, who had remained stiffly seated in the carriage. "It is unheard of! I'll stop here. But please be quick, so that we can drive on!"

"I'll go in," said the fair plump one, and entered the house.

Engel Tiedje remained seated on the shaft, and continued to run his eyes over the carriage until he gradually summoned enough courage to let them rest on the proud and stately lady inside.

Meanwhile the fair one had entered my mother's room and found her in bed. My mother—oh, my dear mother!—she was as sincere and simple as an ear of corn in the cornfield, or a meadow by a stream. But with all her simple truthfulness she was full of dark shadows, and behind her fancifulness ambition secretly swayed her mind. So when the young woman came in—"all milk and blood," as Engel Tiedje afterwards described her—and looked at her with those large fiery eyes, my mother, who was apt to be somewhat cold and suspicious, immediately warmed to her and recovered her good spirits. With a slightly embarrassed though kind and intelligent smile she told her visitor of her predicament, and asked her what had brought her to the forge.

After casting an inquisitive glance round the small dark room, which was so bright and clean, and then at the book my mother had been reading, she turned to her once more. "I am Lena Bornholt," she said, "wife of Professor Bornholt. But," she added, with a broad, kind smile, "that is neither here nor there, for I do not matter. But outside, in a fine large carriage, which we hired in Steenkarken, is the wife of Councillor Mumm, with the christening present. But I see from your face that you know nothing about it. Your husband has made a nice mess of things. He wrote to Councillor Mumm about a child with fair hair. And it has not even arrived yet."

I take it that when my mother heard this my birth was delayed by an hour at least; at all events, she lay still for a while, and shook her head. Then in her short, quiet way she said: "Those two must have made that up in the forge. What a couple of fools!"

"I have already made the acquaintance of the assistant," said the fair one. "A man rather like a pantechnicon."

My mother protested quickly that her husband was quite different—"a very smart, slim man"—and added that she would be only too glad if her child—but here she stopped.

The fair plump one looked at her with her fine eyes and said: "What were you going to say, my dear? You can tell me everything."

"My husband," replied my mother despondently, "is a very good-looking man, but he is delicate. I don't think he will live long. As for me . . . you know, my mind is none too healthy. I am constantly fretting over all kinds of dark thoughts. I feel miserable and wretched and cannot think of anything else. It is quite possible that I too will go over to the other side . . . suddenly . . . yes, it is possible. . . . If my child is to be healthy, he must have his father's cheerful spirits and my body. But how can I hope that things will turn out so well?"

Before my mother could say anything more, the lady in the carriage called out, "Lena!" And the fair plump visitor left my mother, opened the window, explained my mother's condition, and said she could not leave her alone.

"I can't wait any longer," said the stiff dark one. "I'll drive on."

"Then I'll tell your husband and everybody who is anybody in Ballum."

"Lena!" cried the other indignantly, but somewhat anxiously. "Please take care what you say."

"Very well," replied the fair one, "but wait!" Whereupon she left the window and returned to my mother, and spoke encouragingly to her about my future.

Half an hour later my father arrived with the midwife from the town. Somehow or other he had heard what was happening at home, and, leaving his cart in the charge of a neighbour, had found the midwife and brought her across the fields home. He was extremely embarrassed and confused when he saw the fine carriage at his door; he deeply regretted the hasty letter, and, making a silent and polite bow towards the vehicle and its occupant, went to my mother's room with the midwife.

A few minutes later he reappeared in the doorway with the lively fair one at his side. "Look, Sarah," she exclaimed, "this is the father! Doesn't he look fine? 'Pon my soul, if I hadn't a husband already, I could marry him on the spot!"

"Lena—really!"

"Oh, Sarah, why on earth shouldn't I say what I think?" Once more she gazed on my father's spare, attractive form. "He is a little pale about the nose," she observed, "but just look how beautifully his hair lies about his temples!"

My father's pale Frisian face was framed by very thick, wavy hair, which he fastened up with a fillet of ordinary thread, to prevent it from falling over his eyes as he worked. He was wearing the fillet at that moment. I can well imagine that with the twine aslant across his narrow brow, his face a little bit flushed from his walk, and his expression of shame about the letter, he must have looked extremely taking.

But the terrifying dark lady in the carriage hardly looked at him, and only said: "I wish you would stop all this nonsense, Lena! Come along, jump in, and let us drive on."

The fair one objected that the Councillor had sent them to deliver a christening gift.

"But there's no child there!" retorted her stiff companion, pursing her lips.

The fair one replied that the child would be there in a moment, and then, leaning towards her, she said in a whisper which my father overheard: "Or do you find it so difficult to part with the gift?"

This suggestion seemed to impress the stiff lady, and with lips still pursed she thrust her hand into her pocket and pressed a small piece of paper into my father's hand, saying in a haughty, careless manner: "This is from Councillor Mumm of Ballum for the child, because you wrote saying you thought he was a distant relative of yours."

My father thanked her. The fair lady repeated her good wishes, the stately dark one gave a little bow, and the carriage drove away.

My father returned to the bedroom, but was immediately sent away by my mother, so he went to sit beside Engel Tiedje outside the forge. In later years Engel Tiedje often used to declare that he knew nothing of what happened in the following three hours. But just as the sun sank into the sea by the side of the church the midwife appeared and told them they might both come in.

So they both went on tiptoe and stared at my mother and me, as we lay in bed in the light of the stars. Then they sat opposite each other at my mother's sewing-table, and remained thus for an hour or more. And it was only when my dear mother and I had fallen asleep that my father thought of the little piece of paper which the lady with the large head had pressed into his hand. Whereupon he took it from his waistcoat pocket, opened it, and found a large gold piece, with a smooth narrow rim, and strange lettering upon it.

He thought it looked like a fine old coin, and after gazing at it joyfully for some moments handed it to Engel Tiedje. The two men continued to hand it backward and forward to each other for some time, without saying anything, for fear of disturbing our slumbers; then they laid it in front of them on the table.

The table was highly polished. My mother kept everything as clean as a new pin. In the fitful light of the stars the small, bright surface looked like a great broad sheet of water, like the sea at night. And in the middle of it, like a round golden islet, glistening in peaceful mystery, lay the coin.

And thus they sat all through the night, contemplating the golden islet, and listening to our breathing. And from outside there came the soft, heavy murmur of the waves.

. . . . .

What is the first thing I remember? Is it a human being, an object, or an event? I think it must be all three.

I can see myself squatting on my heels on a chair at the window, with some one behind me holding on to me so that I should not fall, while I look at the ice-ferns on the window-pane and scratch them with my little finger. I am a very lively and insatiably inquisitive child. I try to see more and more of the world, and refuse to be satisfied until, looking sideways, I discover the church, surrounded by trees blown crooked by the wind; and, beyond, the undulating expanse of the sea. And now I can hear another voice behind me. It is my mother's voice. She is chiding—probably because we two at the window will catch cold. She picks me up and carries me away to the stove.

The light of day is pouring into the room, and the wind is blowing against the tiny window . . . the wind is always blowing. My mother is leaning over me. I seem to remember that it was always so, without any night between.

She was very much concerned about me, and was always watching me and attending to me. As my father had a bad lung, she was afraid I might have inherited his weakness. Hoping it would help me to grow up strong, her passionate mother's love prompted her to let me have the breast as long as possible. Even when I was able to walk and could climb on to a chair I still drew my strength from my mother. And from the way she put her arm about me and snuggled up to the little arm I put round her neck, I felt how much she loved me. She said very little to me, and I was not allowed to move anything in the room or smear it with my fingers. Everything was in the most perfect order; everything was bright. And my mother's dark hair was the brightest of all.

From time to time strange people entered the room and consulted my mother about swellings, warts, and rashes. And my mother used to consult her books and tell them what to do, and they would thank her and go. When they had gone she took a duster and wiped the chairs where they had sat and the floor where they had stood.

At times a farm wagon would pass the house with a long black box on it; occasionally the box was a short one. And behind the wagon came other wagons with men in high hats, or there might be only a few solemn people on foot. The churchyard lay at such a wide angle from our window that we had to press our faces against the panes in order to see what went on there. But my mother never stirred from the spot, and looked fixedly at what was taking place. I seemed to feel that at such times she was unusually solemn. Truth to tell, she was always solemn. She never laughed. But when we were watching one of those processions she seemed to be particularly solemn, and would talk a great deal. She spoke of dying and of graves and death with a certain eagerness, as if it gave her a curious pleasure to discuss these matters. Only many years later was I to hear of the melancholia that afflicted my mother's family; and of how her father, her father's brother, and other members of her family had ended their lives by their own hand, and of how she too was stricken with that malady, so common along our coast.

Although it must have been about this time, it seems to me to have been much later that I began to be aware of the sound of heavy blows and the ring of metal coming from the other side of the wall, frequently interrupted by the notes of a bright and merry song. When the singing was particularly loud and cheerful, my mother would rise from her work, go to the kitchen, open the door, and in her serious, rather cold voice cry: "Songs in the morning, tears at night!" Now and then, from the direction of the sounds, a man used to appear, wearing a large leather apron, which made a slapping sound as he walked. His face was sooty, sometimes quite black, but all the same it seemed to me to be full of light and good cheer, because the eyes that peered out of the blackness were so bright with love and happiness. Aslant across his fine brow I saw the fillet that held up his thick fair locks. This man used to take me in his arms and carry me through a door and up some steps. We went out on to a little balcony; he showed me the glittering sea and said a good deal that I did not understand.

Then I remembered that my mother must have been afraid to let me go down into the forge, for she kept me out of it as long as possible. A day came, however, when some one opened the door for me—the door against which I had probably been beating with my fists—and I fell down the three steps leading to the forge, into Engel Tiedje's arms. He lifted me from the sooty black flags and comforted me, and this is my first recollection of him, though as a matter of fact I must have seen him every day at meals and on Sundays. He took me into his arms and called me "little prince," and put my arm round his large, dishevelled head, which, sunk deep down between his shoulders, seemed ever so far away. Holding me with his left arm, he plied the bellows with his right. The fire flared up. I seem to remember that he made it flare up more than necessary. I stretched out my arms to the fire, and he spoke—probably to warn me that it would hurt me. And he laughed up at me, with his broad, sooty face surrounded by his dark, shaggy hair. And thus, if my memory is correct, I made friends with him. And oh, how badly was I one day to need his friendship!

Henceforward I was always either in the forge or else playing in the street outside. Again and again during the day my mother would fetch me back into the house, brush my clothes and wash me, and shake her dark head at me. But I could not endure the loneliness of her life, and always contrived to return to the forge. But not without genuine qualms. How I used to stumble over ploughs and ploughshares, harrows and cart-wheels, and stagger about amid forests of horses' and peasants' legs! Sometimes I fell—indeed, I would fall a hundred times a day. But my father, or Engel Tiedje, or one of the peasants always picked me up again. Sometimes the peasants set up an outcry about me. "For God's sake don't let the kid get all over the place like that!" But my father loved to have me by him, and Engel Tiedje was if possible even better pleased. And thus I was always in the bustle and stir of the forge, which seemed to me a world of vast dimensions.

About this time I began to hear my father cough more frequently, and I noticed that he did not work and that his wan face grew thinner and paler than ever. And a strange well-dressed man came to the house, at whom I was never tired of staring. He tapped my father's chest and asked him all kinds of questions, and then talked in low tones to my mother in the kitchen. When my mother told me he was the doctor, I asked her why she had stopped scolding my father.

She was silent, and I was afraid that, as often happened, I would obtain no reply to my question. But after a while she exclaimed: "One does not scold a sick man!"

I don't know whether it was during this illness of my father's or during a later one, but one day—it was in the winter—I went to sit with Engel Tiedje in the forge. I was not at school yet, but I had learnt to read with my mother, and I was reading to Engel Tiedje the story of a journey to the South Sea Islands. With an air of great importance I had asked him what I should read to him. As he knew how fond I was of this story, and also that there were only two or three stories I could read, he had chosen *A Journey to the South Sea Islands*.

But when in the course of my reading I paused to make a remark and looked up at him, I saw that he was crying, and was wiping the tears away with the back of his hand.

I was surprised that he should cry because the girls and boys in Samoa were separated and put in houses apart, but I timidly refrained from saying anything, and, turning to my book again, I continued to read. I read how the natives dived into the sea for fish and coral, and how, when they returned home, the girls sat round a large dish chewing a certain root, and spitting the juice of the root into the dish.

But as he still continued to cry, I thought it very strange that he should be so sad simply because young girls spat into a dish, and I said: " Engel, why are you crying? "

He started, and quickly brushed his tears away. " Was I crying, Otto, my son? . . . Well, fancy that! I didn't know I was! But what you have been reading has been dreadfully sad! "

I felt highly honoured that my reading should have moved him so much, and continued reading louder than ever. But when I looked up again I saw that he was still crying. I also noticed that his mind was far away, thinking of something quite different. His eyes were turned towards the kitchen door, but when I followed them all I saw was the three horseshoes nailed above it. Behind the door, however, I could hear my father coughing, and suddenly, for the first time, it struck me how weak and tired his cough sounded. Then I softly closed my book.

While I sat there looking at Engel Tiedje a fair-haired man, whom I had not seen before, entered the forge from the kitchen. He was of medium height, spare, thin, and puny; his face was bony and bloodless and his lips thin and pale. His eyes were as expressionless as they were cold.

Suddenly I found myself alone with this man, who proceeded to inform me that he was my Uncle Peter.

I stood up and said that I had heard about him, and that I was pleased to see him. This was a barefaced lie, for I did not like the look of him at all; but my mother insisted on my always being polite.

He sat down opposite me on a cart-axle, rubbed his bony hands, blue with cold, and smiled at me in a way that instantly repelled me. And thus he remained for some time, smiling and staring at me.

On my asking him why he had not been to see us before, he explained that there had been a quarrel, but that a little while ago my father had written him a letter full of affection. He also told me that my father's condition was serious—indeed, since the previous day it had become very serious. Then, saying no more, he looked round the forge, and, tapping the floor with his feet, began to whistle in a most ghastly manner, apparently having forgotten all about me.

As he was beginning to make me feel uneasy, I asked him where he lived. He replied that his home was at Steenkarken, and that I was going to live with him. When I protested that I was going to remain with my parents, he replied: "What if you have no parents?"

With a horrified frown I stammered that I should always have my parents. He gave a knavish cackle, which suited his dried-up features admirably, and asked me whether I did not know that my father was seriously ill and would die.

I do not think these words affected me much. Children do not grasp the meaning of such expressions. My one thought was how to contradict and resist him. I protested that my mother would not die. I felt instinctively that although her form was spare, she was physically sound.

"Do you know," he said, with a certain relish, as if he thanked God that it was so, "that there are seventeen diseases of the body—one of which, consumption, your father has got, and I don't think he will ever be up and about again—and seventeen diseases of the soul? People won't believe it; but it is so. And your mother is suffering from one of these diseases."

When I asked him which, he replied with gusto, "The rope!"

"*The rope?*" I repeated in astonishment.

Yes, I had heard aright, and he explained to me that it was a very common disease in these parts, and might be given other names, such as despondency, or, in Latin, *melancholia*.

I asked him whether people ever died of it.

He slapped his bony thigh, and showed his dirty yellow teeth, the hungriest part of this hungry-looking man. "Priceless!" he exclaimed. "Of course one can die of the rope, and that in a few seconds. And remember, she casts longing eyes at it—at the rope, I mean! Just as her father and her father's brother did before her. Yes, it's the truth. And surely one may speak the truth!" He laughed a hard laugh that came like a shrill, unpleasant croak from his scraggy throat, and then, shaking his finger at me, forbade me to say anything about it to my parents.

I did not in the least understand what he meant, but I wanted to change the conversation, which was making me uncomfortable. I probably also wished to impress him; for

I was a vain little boy. They had spoilt me so much. "I am going to the grammar school soon," I said.

"Quite so!" he replied. "And you are to live with me. Your father has just begged me to take you in. Where else could you go, in fact? Your father can't afford to pay much for your keep, so you are coming to me." He smiled so unpleasantly that I had to turn my eyes away and let them wander about the forge. He did likewise, and again began to whistle in his ghastly way.

I remember no more of the conversation, but I do recollect that Uncle Peter went away. His seat was empty and his eyes no longer wandered round. But I occupied my usual place, and how plainly can I see myself sitting there! My hair, which was very fair, was unusually soft, and so long that it reached right down to the collar of my jacket. My head was not exactly big, but it was well developed at the back, which made it striking. My dark blue eyes were not large, but they were deep set, and their expression was serious beyond my years. And thus I sat and talked the matter over with Engel Tiedje as he thrust the points of a harrow into the fire, and I asked him whether he believed my mother was ill.

He either pretended to be surprised, or actually was, and repeated my question while I blinked up into his huge face. Then, assuring me that my mother was the cleverest person in the whole parish, he asked me how I came to ask such a question.

As Uncle Peter had forbidden me to say that he had told me, I lied and answered that it had sometimes struck me that she was unwell. After a pause, as I was still puzzled, I added: "Engel, tell me—have you ever seen Mother with a rope?"

He was dumbfounded, and asked me what on earth my mother could want with a rope.

"But I happen to know," I said, with precocious gravity, 'that she casts longing eyes at one."

He ground his teeth and remarked that I had evidently got my information from Uncle Peter. "Yes, yes," he added, "Almighty God created men and He also created owls, believe me! And this Uncle Peter is one of the owls."

I said this might well be. But where else was I to go if my parents were to die? God forgive me! I said this without tears and even without sadness. But I was only a little boy, and could not grasp the meaning of my words. And had I not been taught that dead people go to God in great glory? "I may not be very fond of him," I said, "but surely it is nice of him to let me live with him when I go to the grammar school? And I'm sure he'll always keep me and give me enough money for my schooling."

Engel Tiedje raised his eyebrows so high that they vanished under his bushy locks, and his eyes gleamed large in his great sooty face. "Yes, yes," he said. "But we have money ourselves, Otto, my boy. We have the house and the meadow which we have let out for grazing. That will pay for a lot of schooling. Besides, I shall always be here."

I expressed my doubts as to whether the money would suffice; but he reminded me that there were always my godfathers to turn to.

I had already heard of my two godfathers, and had often discussed them with Engel Tiedje. I had come to the conclusion that I could rely on Dean Eigen of Buchholz, who had but one granddaughter, and although neither of us knew much about him we were both firmly convinced that he would help me if the worst came to the worst. I believe Engel Tiedje was even more firmly convinced of this than I was.

"It is a great pity," he said, "that your real godfather, the councillor, is dead. For, you see, his wife is a stiff, unbending creature." And he proceeded to repeat the story about the carriage.

"Her name is Sarah Mumm," I observed pompously, "and it was she who gave me that gold coin which is in our cash-box. And she has a thick chain of pure gold round her neck."

"Yes," he said, "that's all quite true. And she had the little plump thing with her. What a creature! Otto, my boy, she was a devilish little thing, with her large eyes that peered right into your face! Lena was her name. That's all we know about her, alas! But I assure you that if we both went to Ballum, and asked for a certain plump little person called Lena, we should find she was as well known there as a spotted dog. Anyone would tell us about her!"

A few months after this conversation, when my father had recovered once more and got back to work, I heard him and

Engel Tiedje discussing Uncle Peter over the anvil, and Engel warning my father against letting me fall into his hands. "He's no good," he said.

And then they began to discuss my godfathers, and Engel Tiedje urged my father to drive over to visit them. My father was doubtful, chiefly because he probably knew how opposed my mother would be to the idea.

I don't know how my father ultimately prevailed on my mother to give her consent, but I certainly have a vivid recollection of my mother telling me that I was to go with my father—a possibility that had never entered my head.

When I heard this I was so beside myself with joy that all the objects in the room seemed to spin round me. "The Gold Lady is the most important," I said to Engel Tiedje in the forge, and I believe I thought she not only had a gold chain and gold clothes, but also a gold nose.

Engel Tiedje dropped his hammer on to the anvil and became absorbed in the subject. "You must be very nice to her, Otto, my boy," he said. "You must look straight into her face with your fine blue eyes and you must say——" He stopped. Then he added hesitatingly that although he did not believe what Uncle Peter had told me about my parents it might very well happen, and that was why I was to speak to her. When I was alone with her I was to tell her that I hoped she would take charge of me if I were left an orphan.

He brushed a hand across his eyes and gulped, and as he turned away I saw his broad shoulders heaving.

When I think how calmly and smugly I used to discuss the possibility of losing my parents, who were so loving and kind to me, and surrounded me with every proof of their warm affection, my eyes sting even now.

The day of the journey came, and I remember standing in the bedroom ready for my father long before daybreak. I can still see my mother examining my new suit and stroking it with her hands! She had made it herself and was not quite satisfied with her work. It evidently looked a little bit awkward and stiff. Then my father came in. How vividly I remember him! His face looked pinched and pale, and his long, thick hair lay becomingly about his brow. Then he went out again, and once more I was left alone with my mother, who looked out of the window and cried. I could not see her face, but I knew from her attitude that her black thoughts had got the upper hand.

Then, suddenly convulsed by a storm of tears, she muttered: "I am of no use in this world, my child! It would be far better if I were in the churchyard. My darling, darling child! Promise me you will visit your parents' grave once every year!"

I nodded sadly.

Holding a light in one hand, she led me to the front door and opened it, and, walking away in the darkness at my father's side, I turned round and saw her standing there. . . . I see her as plainly as if she were still there! . . . Oh, if only she were still there!

Before we turned the corner of the neighbouring farm we both looked round again and saw the light still at the door, but we could not see her any longer.

CHAPTER II

My First Journey

My father and I mounted the gig, and Engel Tiedje, with a lantern in his hand, stood close by. The horse constantly threw up his head, and tugged at the reins, and I heard my father say to Engel Tiedje in his weak head voice: "Get back to the house quickly, Engel, and keep a sharp eye on things!" And again: "Keep a sharp eye on things, my dear fellow! You must not let her out of your sight."

I had made up my mind to ask my father what Engel Tiedje was to keep a sharp eye on; but what with the horse whizzing us forward through the darkness—or so it seemed to me—I forgot to do so; for I doubted whether all our wild swaying and lurching could possibly end happily. Gradually, however, as we did not seem to meet with any disaster, I gained confidence, and ventured from time to time to take my eyes off the horse's head and to glance quickly at what lay on either side of the road.

It must have been midday—for we had driven twenty-five miles—when we stopped at a river, which seemed enormous to me, and my father, pointing to the town on the other side of it, said: "That is Ballum."

My father must certainly have been hail-fellow-well-met wherever he went, and must have liked to talk to every one, and I marvel now when I remember that he did not enter into conversation with the gigantic ruddy-faced ferryman who conveyed us across the stream, but remained silent on the box of the gig. Being an inquisitive child, I got down, and followed the ferryman as he walked backward and forward on the ferry.

Even when I was only a child there must have been something about my eyes which attracted people's attention and made them speak to me; for when the ferryman saw me following him about watching him he exclaimed, in deep tones: "A regular little Paul Pry, and no mistake!" And he laughed uproariously at his own remark.

Not knowing what a Paul Pry was, I thought there must be a bird of some kind on my shoulder, for he seemed to be looking at my shoulder as he spoke. So I said: "I haven't seen it."

He laughed uproariously again, throwing his head back, and I saw his red-gold beard shake. "I mean you," he explained. "You are the Paul Pry."

"Because I am so small?" I inquired, still at a loss to understand.

"So small," he repeated, and raised his first finger, which was huge enough in all conscience, to show how small I was.

I can't remember at which inn we put up in Ballum, but I know that we walked up an avenue of limes towards a stately looking house and that my father held my hand very tight. After ascending some steps, my father opened a door which had a massive bronze handle, and we entered a lofty old hall, surrounded by white doors with gilt mouldings. But instead of the tall dark lady covered with gold whom Engel Tiedje had led me to expect we saw emerging from a passage at the back an extremely rotund and by no means young woman with remarkably strong, short arms. My father had a moment's conversation with her, whereupon, to my surprise, he seized my hand again, went towards the door, and we were outside again. It appeared that Frau Mumm had been living for the last year in Hamburg with her children. My father coughed a great deal as he explained this to me, and, while I noticed how feeble and dry his cough sounded, I could not help feeling he was also sick at heart.

We must have stayed some time in Ballum, but the next thing I remember was that we were once again on the road in our gig, driving through villages, and woods, and across moors. I must have fallen asleep when, to spare the horse's legs, my father turned into a cart-track across some fields.

I awoke to find a finger tapping the tip of my nose. I fancied it was Engel Tiedje, and was just going to scold him and brush his hand aside, when he laughed and said, "Otto! Otto!" I was surprised that his voice should sound so clear and sweet, and looking up I saw a little girl of about my own age, with fair curly hair cut rather short and a face as radiant as the sun. I particularly noticed the beautiful warm light in her eyes and the tender lines of her mouth.

I was lying in a white bed in a bright, low-ceilinged room;

but, taking everything for granted, I asked no questions. In any case my little friend gave me no time to do so; for she pulled me out of bed, helped me to dress, and, leading me through a hall, which with its many yellow cupboards looked very stately, took me to a room, where we sat down at a table, and a rather cross woman, whom she called Frau Trina, poured milk into our cups.

I now learnt that my father had gone for a long drive with the little girl's grandfather. "Grandpa drives round the country every day," she explained, "visiting churches or schools, and you can imagine how pleased he is to have somebody in his carriage with him. Does your father mind tobacco-smoke?"

I said I hoped not, and added sententiously that as he was a blacksmith I trusted he could put up with a little tobacco-smoke.

My little companion informed me that she was Almut Eigen, the dean's grandchild; and, as I felt quite at home, and knew that my father was safe, I gave myself up entirely to my lively little friend, who promptly took charge of me.

We left the house and went through a large garden into a wood with trees that looked gigantic to me. I had learnt from Engel Tiedje that a wood was a place full of mysterious animals, where strange things happened, and I wondered what we should do if the trees suddenly took it into their heads to lie down.

Overpowered by this thought, I dropped on the grass, and allowed my little friend to walk on. For a while she did not notice that I was not at her side, and continued on her way singing in the most delightful way.

Suddenly, seeing that I was not near her, she turned round, and, guessing from my expression what was wrong, ran back to me, took my hand, and did all she could to comfort me.

I wandered spellbound by her side, as, laughing and skipping about, she led me farther into the wood, the depths of which I continued to scan with great suspicion and anxiety, while she pointed out the pine-cones, the toadstools, the deer-tracks, and the squirrels.

At last we reached a narrow path through the wood, and in front of us we saw a dilapidated peasant's cottage, sursounded by trees, which she called "the hunting-box." I was frightened and stopped short, but she ran towards it, pulling me along with her, and as the door was open we entered.

When I had satisfied myself that there was nothing in the hall or the three rooms, which were all quite empty, to arouse my suspicion, I recovered my courage a little—probably because I now found myself safe within four walls. Suddenly, with her eyes sparkling, she suggested that we should go to see Hans. When I asked who Hans was she led me to one of the lowest windows, which was thick with dust, and pointed to something in the distance. Looking out I saw a large break in the trees, and far away on the other side of it a substantial farmhouse.

"That's where Hans lives," she said, in a sweet singsong voice, as though she were speaking of her mother, her home, or some one she dearly loved. Evidently her whole life was centred here.

We left the tumbledown old cottage, and when we could obtain a clear view to the east she pointed with her little hand to some broad green meadows in the depths of the valley. "All those meadows belong to me," she said. "I inherited them from my grandmother."

We had covered about half the distance, when she told me that Hans was already a big fellow and could drive the plough alone. Then, suddenly turning her head, she called "Hans!" lustily, and ran across the fields, dragging me along with her, towards a ploughman. When he saw us coming he pulled up his team. But she continued to call his name at the top of her voice, always in the same beautiful singsong tones, making two syllables of it.

I shall never forget how the great clumsy youth of fifteen, in his grimy stable-boy's clothes, bent down and stretched out his huge brown hands, hardened by frost and work, to clasp her tenderly in his arms. "So it's you, little Almut, is it?" he said.

He was very friendly to me, and let Almut tell him who I was and how nicely I had played with her. But I felt that I was nobody, and that his eyes and mind were all for her. His face was large and plain, rough-hewn and unfinished-looking. Simplicity, not to say stupidity, was stamped on every feature, particularly on his large mouth, which was quite shapeless. But an intelligent, kindly soul peered through his dark eyes, which were unusually deep-set.

He put us on his horses and led us towards the farm, and the two of them spoke about Fritz. He had written and would be home from school in a month.

"Fritz is my brother," he said proudly, turning his wooden face to me; and in the slow singsong tones that loneliness breeds he added: "There's a lad for you! The best-looking lad in the whole world. Isn't he, Almut?"

But she merely let her little hand drop on his cap, and with touching gentleness said: "But you are Hans!"

"I am the block of wood, Hans Hellebeck, that's what I am, and nothing more," he replied; and, turning to me, he added: "I must tell you that I am only his half-brother . . . his elder half-brother."

Her happy face turned mutinous. "Ah, but he's not as nice as you," she said.

He protested in astonishment, and repeated that Fritz was the finest boy in the land.

"That's not true," she rejoined. "He's not nearly as nice as you are."

He retorted by pronouncing a panegyric on his half-brother, and explained that Almut was to have him as a husband because he was so fine.

"Yes, yes," she said, very gravely, "we've settled all that. But you must always stay on the farm. You mustn't go away and marry some one else."

He agreed, and declared that a man like himself, a clodhopper with a mouth like an oven door, would never marry, but would remain with them, and tend the cattle and look after the farm while she and Fritz went travelling.

When we reached the farm a very tall, stately woman with beautiful grey hair came to the door. My little friend informed me that she was Hans' mother; but he corrected her, and said she was not to say that. His own mother had died at his birth. The woman was his stepmother.

She came slowly up to us, and immediately overwhelmed us with kind and flattering words, which seemed to pour with wonderful ease from her lips. "Isn't he a pretty little fellow?" she said, looking into my face. "And what clever eyes he has! I'm sure you're very clever at school!"

I told her that I did not go to school yet, but that my mother had taught me to read. This provoked a fresh avalanche of compliments. And on hearing from Almut that I was kind and friendly, she concluded by saying: "Yes, that is most important. One must be kind to everybody. Isn't that so, my darling, sweet little Almut?"

My little friend seemed accustomed to the woman's ways and did not even listen. But I devoured her with my eyes and ears, and, as she led me by the hand, her whole personality and particularly the soft bloom of her face filled me with admiration.

We entered a large room with good, bright furniture, and a maid brought our meal. Almut ran out through the hall and shouted to Hans that we were all at table, and he came in wearing a somewhat better-looking, though badly fitting jacket. Behind him came an old farm-hand, a tall, thin, clean-shaven man, with straw-coloured hair, slightly grey on the temples. One of his eyes was closed, as if it were asleep, but the other was set deep in his head, and looked like an old trapped fox peering out of its bony hollow. Almut informed me that he was Sören the farm-labourer.

During the conversation that ensued the woman managed to repeat that one must always be friendly to everybody, and she appealed to Hans to confirm the sentiment. "Isn't that so, my dear good old Hans?" she cried. And, answering the question herself, she added: "Yes, my dear, good old Hans thinks I am certainly right about that."

I remember that I did not take my eyes off her—in the first place, because she was extraordinarily beautiful, and, secondly, because her fulsome flow of compliments was something entirely new to me. But I also had time to observe the others.

I am not sure that it was actually on this first day of our acquaintance that I noticed both Hans and the man Sören constantly looking at the woman as if they had a question, a request, or a suspicion to lay before her, and that I thought her exaggerated garrulity and friendliness might be due to her need of concealing something; but I certainly noticed that Hans and little Almut never ceased to be one in spirit, and were drawn to each other as if by a magnet. I observed this more particularly when Frau Hellebeck produced a photograph of her son Fritz, which she had received from him tha morning, and handed it to Almut, with all manner of encomiums upon his beauty.

Almut passed it on to me, and I saw the picture of as well set up and handsome a boy of thirteen as you could possibly imagine. His features were noble, and his bearing seemed a perfect blend of calm steadfastness and undaunted courage. It was impossible to conceive of a more striking contrast to his half-brother. They were like Jacob and Esau.

When I handed the photograph to Hans, he again praised his half-brother as enthusiastically as he had done in the fields, and finally, appealing to Almut, he exclaimed: "Come, Almut! Just see what a fine fellow he looks!" And as he looked at me with eyes full of enthusiasm, his face seemed to reveal all the bestial stupidity of an idiotic old sheep.

Frau Hellebeck patted him on the back. "Dear, good old Hans!" she exclaimed, looking at us with great emotion. And, suppressing a tear, she turned to Almut and added: "Almut, my pet, when you and Fritz are married, you must always be kind to dear good old Hans!"

A moment later I saw little Almut cling with such fervent ardour to Hans, declaring that she would marry Fritz only on condition that Hans always remained with them, that I ventured to ask why he could not marry her himself.

The beautiful woman laughed loud and heartily at this suggestion, and patting her stepson on the back as if he had been a horse or a dog, exclaimed: "What a funny idea! What? Our good old stick-in-the-mud Hans, our dear, good old house-dog Hans, marry beautiful, beaming Almut Eigen?" After continuing in this strain for some minutes, she at last assured us that Hans would never marry, but would always remain at home to look after the farm, so that the beautiful birds Fritz and Almut might be free to fly round the world. And she appealed to Almut and to her "dear, good old Hans" to correct her if she were wrong; which of course they did not do.

As evening fell we were waiting somewhere in the garden, when we saw an old closed carriage rattling unsteadily towards us. A big fat man was sitting on the box, enveloped in a thin cloud of smoke. At first I thought that his round red head would soon be on fire, but then I noticed that behind him, on the roof of the carriage, there was a chimney, from which a thin blue column of smoke was issuing. The carriage stopped, Almut sprang on to the footboard, and opened the door. Through the smoke I saw my father, his eyes bright with joy, and I fear also with fever, and beside him a clean-shaven old man with hair reaching down to his shoulders, puffing vigorously at a long pipe. We clambered in and found the two in earnest conversation. At least, my father was not saying much, although he evidently wanted to speak again and again, in an effort to change the subject. But every time the dear invalid—for he was very ill, and therefore much concerned about me—tried to lead the conversation round to me, the old dean, who seemed hard of hearing, paid not the slightest heed, but continued his story, which appeared to be about his student days, while my father, with eyes strangely bright and restless, listened patiently.

We stayed three days at Buchholz, and every day was exactly the same, even to the evening meeting with my father, when he returned with the dean and tried in vain to interrupt the old man's endless account of his student days and to lead the conversation round to me.

On the third day, when I had begun to feel much more at home, I ventured boldly to ask Hans a question in his stepmother's presence. "When did your mother die, Hans?" I said.

Slightly perturbed, he replied that she had been dead a long, long time. But Frau Hellebeck quickly joined in and explained how wise it was of Hans and his father to have fetched her to the farm, and asked her dear good old Hans to correct her if that were not true.

"And then your father died too?" I inquired, thinking of what I had been told about my own parents.

He looked dreamily at me. "Yes, six years ago," he replied, in his lonely, singsong voice. Then in answer to a further question he added: "He had been in bed three days with inflammation of the lungs—it wasn't serious at all. I remember quite well he was rather lively and spoke to me—but on the following evening he died."

His stepmother slapped him on the back. "Oh, you dear good old Hans," she said compassionately, "don't go on brooding over all that again!"

"I wouldn't brood over it," he replied, in his attractive voice, "had I not lain awake longer than usual that night, and heard a sound like an ox trying hard to get its breath. That's what it was like."

"Your poor dear father was very ill, my dear good old boy!" said his stepmother.

"Yes, but that's just what I can't see," he protested. "He didn't look as ill as all that. I always fancy it's just possible some one may have done something to my father."

Was I wrong in thinking that in the boy's eyes, as he uttered these words, there was a look of searching cunning, and that a shudder went round the table which caused the woman and Sören to wince? I don't know. But I remember that the farm-labourer rose from the table and left the room, while Frau Hellebeck, patting her stepson firmly and emphatically on the back, added the word 'stupid' to her usual torrent of flattery, and asked him to tell her who could possibly have done anything to his father.

He said he had lain awake and heard his father groan every time he moved in bed. But it was not serious. Then he had heard a footstep. It was neither the dean's nor the doctor's. It was soft and swift, and it went up to his father's bed, and then his father spoke no more.

I remember seeing Frau Hellebeck stoop down and pat him on the back, assuring him that he must have heard ghosts; but was there not some embarrassment, some uneasiness in her face as she spoke, which set my childish mind working?

I remember no more about that day. But early on the morning of the fourth day my father and I were again sitting in the gig and the horse was pulling at the reins. My father made one more eleventh-hour attempt to speak about my future. He said that we were all mortal, and that it was possible I might lose my parents. But the old dean interrupted him again with a story about a schoolmate of lurid memory. I don't know what my father thought of the story; I imagine he was surfeited with the old dean's reminiscences.

When at last we reached home I said, "Father, what is that light?"

"That is Mother," he replied.

"But why is the light in the forge and not in the bedroom?"

"Yes," my father replied, "I was wondering about that too," and I noticed that as he spoke there was a quiver in his voice.

But when we drew up to the house we saw Engel Tiedje's broad squat form. He was swinging a lantern, and as he raised it aloft, he said very seriously: "All's well, all's well."

In his weak sick voice, which I still seem to hear with emotion after all these years, my father cried: "God be praised!" And there was a prayer in those words which for fervour and depth I have never heard equalled. Then my mother appeared at the kitchen door, and came out to the gig and lifted me down. But as she was not very tall she had to reach out a great deal, and I was very proud at having been perched up so high.

. . . . .

I don't know whether my father had caught cold on this journey; but, in any case, he became rapidly worse after we got back. His bright singing ceased, he coughed incessantly, and when worn out by work and short of breath he was obliged to sit down; the green fillet across his brow stood out crudely from the deathly pallor of his skin.

One day he and Engel Tiedje were talking over their work. They did not know I was close by, watching the neighbour's farm-boy pushing barrow-loads of dung from the stables; and I heard my father say that, although he was glad to have learnt a trade, he found it hard to take up the hammer again after having spent three days in the company of teachers and the dean. Then suddenly, as he turned his glance to the neighbour's farm-boy, whom I was watching, he added: "Oh, my dear, dear Engel, save my child from the dung cart!"

My poor dear father! I wonder what thoughts passed through his head about me at such moments! How lonely he had always been! I believe he deliberately kept aloof from me in order to avoid infecting me. He did not even have this one pleasure—poor man! Thus my real associate was Engel Tiedje; he it was who provided the environment of my childhood. I told him everything. And, as something seemed to prevent me from discussing the details of our journey with my father, I described the whole experience to Engel Tiedje. He was enthusiastic. He saw me as the dean's successor, and, looking straight into my eyes, drew a brilliant picture of my future.

About this time my mother had a spell of deep despondency that lasted for weeks, and she paid hardly any attention to me. The dark brown furniture in our rooms, which usually shone so brightly, grew all tarnished and dusty, and Engel Tiedje did all the housework during the night, before the peasants came with their horses and ploughs. I don't believe he ever went to bed. One day, just after he had given me a bath, I asked him why he had no wife and children. It was quite plain that he did not relish the subject, but he replied that he had had a wife and that she had run away. When I asked him whether I could go and fetch her back, he exclaimed in alarm: "For heaven's sake, Otto, my boy!" And he explained to me that he was frightened of her. "Otto, my boy, she is a baggage!"

As I had never heard of such a creature, I felt extremely sorry for him, and asked him how he had come across her.

"She was always coming to my forge with her warming-pan to fetch away red-hot coals—that's how it was," he replied.

In answer to further frightened inquiries from me, for I was feeling very much afraid of her, he admitted that it had all happened in my father's forge, and that it was not precisely wrong of her to come as she did; for, after all, "why should not a mad young woman come twice a day to the smith and complain of her cold feet or her pains, and ask for hot coals, and have a few minutes' chat with the assistant? But she used to complain that the coals I put in her pan were not hot enough, and said she must make them red. And then she would sing and dance about the forge, and set the whole place, including our customers, on fire. It was as if the devil himself had fallen down the chimney and squatted on the coals. Oh, she was a regular baggage, Otto, my boy!"

Full of uneasy curiosity, I asked him what she looked like.

"She had a head like a bright little copper saucepan, Otto," he replied, "and she was always boiling over. . . . Oh, yes, she is still alive. How could she help being alive? She was seventeen then, and it is only seven years ago."

He also told me that she was in service somewhere in Ballum, and I exclaimed, for it occurred to me that I might be going to Ballum again.

When I was sent to school the reading lessons I had had from my mother and the odd pieces of wisdom I had picked up from her mysterious little books made me stand out from the rest of the village children, and while my queer fantastic knowledge alarmed my teacher it inspired my schoolfellows, as it did Engel Tiedje, with the most exaggerated respect for me.

"Otto," said Engel, "your father has been able to spend four whole days cooped up in a carriage with a dean who never stopped talking about schoolboy escapades and student rags. If I had had to do that I should have gone mad! And as for your mother, she can see under people's skins, which no one else in the village can do, and she can also cure warts by merely stroking them with her firm little hand. But you can do more than either of them."

I accepted his praise with great pride, and we felt more than ever united—he with me because of the great things he saw in the future, and I with him because he was such a daring believer in my powers.

In the spring, about a year after I had started school, my father fell ill again. And this time it was serious. At first he used to sit in the parlour near the stove, while I sat opposite him at the round table, which did not seem to me as bright as in former days, and gravely tried to build houses with coloured paper. During the whole of my schooldays I always preferred a thousand times to indulge my imagination or do something with my fingers rather than pore over my lessons. And I now think with some bitterness of my father looking on and probably wondering what good such profitless pastimes would be to me.

After that he took to his bed, and looked very pale and coughed a great deal; while my mother, with a solemn face, moved hither and thither, from the kitchen to the bedroom, and back again, taking care of him, and giving him as much help and comfort as she could. This kept her so sad and busy that she could not attend to me, and I was constantly with Engel Tiedje in the forge.

One morning, when my mother and I were at breakfast and Engel Tiedje was already in the forge, Uncle Peter came on the scene again. Thrusting his lean form through the door, his puny womanish face wreathed in smiles, he held out his flabby bony hand to my mother and myself, saying something foolish and laughing a hollow laugh. Then he went up to my father's bed. My father with great difficulty supported himself on an elbow, and talked to him for a long while in low tones. They were discussing the house, the debts, and the grazing field at the back of the house, and they settled that Engel Tiedje should carry on by himself. Then they talked about me, and, in his feeble voice, my father informed me that for a small weekly sum Uncle Peter had undertaken to let me live with him while I attended the grammar school, and that Engel Tiedje would pay him out of what he earned by the forge and the grazing meadow.

Afterwards, when Uncle Peter was in the forge, inspecting and examining everything, I thought I should like to hear him speak again and find out more about him, although I did not really like him. At last he asked me what I intended to study. As I had never heard of studying for any calling except that of the Church, I replied with great firmness that I should probably be a clergyman. He agreed, but warned me that in that case they would tie me to the sail of a windmill, and I should be whirled round and round, preaching all the while. They would do that, he said, to make sure they would not have to sit with their eyes glued to the pulpit all day. I was frightened, and said I was not at all sure whether I should like this calling after all. Nevertheless, I wondered at the change in his voice since he had left the bedroom. It was noticeably easier and more cheerful; only many years later did I learn that it was the voice of irony—a tone I myself never used and but rarely understood. He then suggested I might be an Arctic explorer, a ventriloquist, or even a catcher of grasshoppers, and as he spoke his mirth increased so much that I was seriously afraid he would fall off the bench on which he was sitting, though I marvelled at the number of funny callings there appeared to be.

Suddenly he got up and went to the garden, and I followed him. I tried to put my hand in his, as I should have done with Engel Tiedje or anyone else, and wondered why he did not take it. He examined the garden, and then went over the grazing field, which my father had let. He appeared to measure it with his eyes, and was angry when I could not tell him how much my father got for it. Suddenly, after looking at me intently for a moment, he asked me whether I coughed at all.

I shook my head.

"Why don't you open your mouth?" he asked.

I turned my back to the wind and replied that my mother had told me to keep my mouth closed against the east wind.

"On the contrary!" he exclaimed. "You must harden yourself!"

When I replied that even the doctor had told me to keep it shut, he said that was all wrong, and that if I did not harden myself I should fall ill and die. So, turning to face the wind, he began to sing in his squeaky woman's voice, bidding me do likewise: "And such is life, and such is life!" which I afterwards discovered was his favourite song.

I cannot remember how or when I saw my dear father for the last time. Some one led me by the hand; I think it was an old widow, who was our neighbour. But when I heard the sound of heavy, laboured breathing I grew frightened, and another hand led me out of the room. I hope whoever did this has been rewarded by God, for that hand enabled me to retain a picture of my father which, though pale and exhausted, still bore an expression of peace and happiness.

Presently one of those black boxes stood before the house, and I suspected, though I did not actually know, that my father was lying in it. Whereupon a number of men appeared in long black coats and black hats. At first I thought they were strangers, but, to my surprise, I ultimately found they were neighbours. They carried the coffin and we walked behind, I bearing a wreath. Engel Tiedje remained at home, because he feared for my mother's reason, and Uncle Peter walked at my side. But he did not hold my hand.

CHAPTER III

Hard Times

THE following morning, as my mother was too deeply distressed to look after me, Engel Tiedje brought me my best clothes and told me that I was to go with Uncle Peter to Steenkarken at once.

I was highly delighted—so much so, in fact, that I fear I made it rather difficult for him to dress me. I was all eagerness and expectation, and left my father's fresh grave and my dear mother in her bottomless dejection with an astonishingly light heart. I remember that I was not a little surprised when Engel Tiedje began to speak of the possibility of my getting into trouble in some way, and I replied that I did not know what he meant. How could I get into trouble, seeing that I should be with Uncle Peter, who was always so jolly, "much jollier than you"?

He suggested that it was always possible for a man to change, and as he appeared to be pondering deeply what we should do if Uncle Peter were to change, I proposed various plans. But he rejected them all, and said the best thing would be for me to send him a postcard. He had actually prepared one for me and hidden it in the lining of my jacket. Then he produced a little packet, opened it, and showed me a small old-fashioned box, containing two gold pieces, telling me to be sure I got the right change if I ever paid for anything with them. After which with great pride he showed me the post-card. It was covered with writing, but a space had been left between the words at one spot, while on the back it bore his address. The writing read: "I am prepared to supply you with .... rod-iron at low prices. Hanemeyer and Co." I was to hide this card and, according to the extent of my misery, was to fill the space with the word 'thin,' 'medium,' or 'thick.'

Then Uncle Peter appeared, and all three of us started off.

I don't think I saw my mother at all that morning. My companions each carried one of the two parcels containing my scanty belongings, and I walked between them. After discussing the cost of my keep, which Engel Tiedje was to send him quarterly, my uncle became very jolly and whistled and sang, and told us stories of his travels as an apprentice. I was very happy, and thought it a wonderful adventure. On reaching the pine plantation on the crest of the hill Engel Tiedje had to turn back, and we said good-bye.

How vividly I remember the change that suddenly came over my uncle! Not the very moment that Engel Tiedje left us, but quite soon afterwards all his good spirits vanished. He stopped singing and whistling, and with features more pointed than ever looked straight ahead. When I ventured to speak to him he did not answer, but simply looked coldly at me, gave me the two parcels to carry, and pushed me forward to make me walk faster. I was somewhat taken aback by this sudden change, but soon forgot it, and with a parcel under each arm trotted at his side, with my eyes full of the novel scenes about me.

Thus we went on for an hour, until at last I felt tired, and tearfully told him so. Without moving a muscle of his face he told me to sit on the wall; he sat down too, and looked for the food which we had brought with us. But he could not find it in either parcel, and said I must have dropped it; then, looking angrily at me, he gave me a violent blow on the head.

Never in my life had I been beaten, and once when I had witnessed a beating I was so frightened that I had run home crying. And now I was undergoing this terrible experience myself! I screamed in horror, and flung myself on the grass and cried. For a while he took no notice of me; then he made me get up, and we went on.

He had reluctantly taken a few coppers from his pocket, and was turning them over and over in his fingers as if he were trying to make them more, cursing and groaning in a most terrifying manner. When a little while later we reached a village he seized me by the ear and forced me to look up at him. His thin vacant face was full of bitter hatred and malice. In his cracked voice he told me to go in to the village and find the cheapest inn, and woe betide me if it proved too expensive!

I went ahead through the village, feeling terrified. As far as the church I saw no inn at all; but there was one just beyond, and the host, a broad, fat man with a jolly face, was standing at the door. I was naturally trustful, and believed that good will went a long way; so going up to him I explained that I had lost the food we had brought with us, and said we should like something to eat and drink, but that it must not cost too much, or my uncle would be angry.

Setting me down on the bench by the door, he was asking me all kinds of questions, when my uncle came up and sat down beside us. The landlord then went inside and fetched us bread and coffee, and we regaled ourselves, while he stood in front of us, sunning a fine piece of bacon in the spring sunlight, and observing us closely. My uncle was still turning his coppers over and over in his fingers, and, when we had finished, he asked the landlord in his squeaky voice what he owed. "Well," replied our host with a nod, "you see, you two are rather a queer couple. If I charged you a shilling it would not be too much, would it? At the same time I'm so taken with the youngster that I feel inclined to make him a present of a shilling. So we are quits, and you can put your measly coppers back in your pocket."

So we went on our way, and I grew more and more exhausted at every step. But as my uncle made me walk just in front of him, and every now and again gave me a push from behind, I constantly had to trot to keep pace with him. And to this day, whenever I see a child walking beside a thoughtless adult and having to trot every few steps, I cannot help recalling my agonizing walk across Bunsoh Heath.

I must have dropped asleep at intervals on that breathless journey, for suddenly I found we were in a low-ceilinged room where an old woman was lying in bed. She was my grandmother. When she heard that her beloved Hermann, my father, was dead, she burst into tears, and called me to the bedside to have a look at me. She was almost blind, but declared that I was like her son Hermann, and proceeded to pray for me. The room was poor and very bare, and I noticed that in a corner my uncle was silently helping himself to the poor old woman's black bread and butter, and stuffing sandwiches of it into one of my parcels. Meanwhile he explained how he had taken pity on me, and hoped that God would reward him. He also complained of the small sum he was to be paid for my keep, and, to my surprise, mentioned a sum that was half of what he had settled with Engel Tiedje.

Again and again, as he spoke, my grandmother exclaimed: "Yes, yes, your words are all very fine; so were your father's . . . but afterwards——" At last, probably in response to his incessant complaints, she pulled an old purse out of her mattress, and handed him three or four marks—possibly all the poor woman had—and then after she had given me her blessing we left.

Outside I heard a faint laugh as he once more proceeded to push me in front of him, as if I were a barrow or at best a goat; and at the end of a quarter of an hour we entered a crooked little low cottage, which, from the smell of leather and pitch about it, I knew must be our destination.

I was shoved into a small room, packed with furniture, in which a large bed and a desk were the objects that particularly caught my eye. From its musty smell I gathered that it was the best room. Beyond this we entered a small, almost unfurnished closet, containing an enormous easy chair and a table; my uncle informed me that this was my room.

I was dead tired, and as I saw no bed I asked where I was to sleep.

"Here, of course—where else?" he replied, pointing to the easy chair. "You must tell your friends that you sleep in the bed in the next room, but I could not always be making it for you. You are small and the chair is a big one. You'll find a blanket under the seat." Then pulling it out he laid it on the chair and left me.

Dead tired though I was, I was so deeply stirred by all I had been through that I could not lie down, but sat for quite a long while on the table. In any case the easy chair was so dilapidated and torn that, far from tempting me, it made me shudder. Its cover was hanging in festoons, while its stuffing and springs were oozing from a hundred rents. At last, however, nature got the upper hand, and it seemed as if the chair were actually beckoning like a friend. So, overcoming my repulsion, I curled up in its lap, pulled the blanket over me, and very soon I was wafted back to the forge and Engel Tiedje.

What a change in my little life! I awoke and looked incredulously at the table before me. How could my mother's table have come to look like that! Then, all of a sudden, I remembered where I was, and I believe my expression altered from that moment; for I acquired a look of deep, terrified earnestness, and secret, eager searching, far beyond my years.

Having dressed myself, I went to the workshop, where my uncle was sitting with the apprentice. The latter's name was Paul Sooth. Thin and spare, he had a small round head on a long thin neck, and large round eyes, which always looked sad, not to say horrified—the more so because his dark hair was stiff and stubborn and stuck out in all directions as if it had been glued. With his eyes riveted on his work he never looked up; and for a day or two I thought him dumb. In order to make sure, I asked him one day, when my uncle was out of the room, how he was. Whereupon he looked at me with his large, sad, horrified eyes, and said: "I—oh . . . I? Oh, I see things very black." Then he relapsed into silence. Only now and again, when he made a mistake and my uncle gave him a blow on the arm, did he wince and utter a faint "Oh!"

Taking my place at the dirty table in the corner where the couple had already breakfasted, I would pour myself out some very weak coffee, and partake of bread and dripping. I could not help wondering why there was always so little there; for although I got something to eat I never felt satisfied. Then I would go to my wretched little room and contemplate the great easy-chair, or else look out into the garden, until I heard my uncle's squeaky falsetto voice calling me. Passing through the room between, I used to linger as long as possible on my way, and was able to take such thorough stock of everything in that most hateful of all Sunday parlours that I remember every detail of it to this day. Then my uncle would send me to the scullery behind the workshop and set me to peeling and washing potatoes. Our dinner consisted chiefly of potatoes, a scrap of bread, and a minute speck of bacon, and when it was over I had to wash up. Not a word was spoken by any of us, and the moment I had done washing up my uncle cried: "Now kick out!"

In the afternoon I would wander about the streets, and, finding my way down a narrow alley, take my stand by some tall railings and gaze at the large two-storied building where in the following week I was to go to school. This I did again and again.

As long as we were alone my uncle Peter never addressed a word either to me or to the apprentice, but the moment customers appeared he would laugh, joke, and sing, and become quite talkative. As a rule he began to sing or warble the moment he heard the front door open. For a while I imagined that the mere opening of the door, by letting in the fresh air, made him more lively, and I would open the door from time to time, in the hope of improving his spirits. Then thinking it might be the effect of the jolly people who came in and always greeted him with some sort of banter, I went up to him one day and addressed him in the same bantering tones. But this experiment failed also. He looked coldly and angrily at me and was silent. It took me a year to discover that sullen and angry taciturnity was natural to him, and that he assumed the attitude of jolly banter for which he was known throughout the town only to gratify his womanish vanity, and because it paid with his fellow-townsmen.

To my surprise, on the afternoon before the school opened he went with me to call on the headmaster; but he probably did so only because it flattered his vanity to have a nephew at the grammar school. The headmaster was an old white-haired man, of fine build, though slightly bent, and with a face so noble that he was like what I had always imagined God to be.

The first thing about him that astonished me was the way he constantly stuffed lumps of some black powder into his nose. I had never seen anybody do this before. And what puzzled me most was that he did not seem to do it for pleasure, because he pulled such a wry face all the while.

When my uncle had greeted him and introduced me most humbly, I gazed at him with my large eyes, quite ready to believe in him and respect him like a god. He did not take any notice of my uncle, but looked only at me as though I were a calf with five legs or some other monstrosity. "Otto Babendiek," he repeated, "I don't understand."

My uncle was highly amused; his arms and legs twitched and he was about to break out into his favourite ditty, "And such is life . . . and such is life," when, pulling himself together, he urged me to explain matters.

But I did not know what was wrong. Surely I was Otto Babendiek! My eyes began to fill with tears.

The Almighty—but I shall not call him that any longer—the headmaster, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying my discomfiture, and still looking at me with a gloomy and angry expression, he said: "Well, is it beginning to dawn on you?"

I repeated my name.

"Appalling!" he exclaimed, and wriggled as if he were confronted by some God-forsaken idiot. I began to suspect that the old man was pulling my leg, a proceeding hardly in keeping with his snowy locks and my tender years. In my heart of hearts I began to despise him, but as I knew I was in his power I did my best to solve the riddle.

"Otto Babendiek?" he shouted. "What do you mean? What have I to do with Otto Babendiek?"

I replied that I wished to become a pupil at his school.

"At last!" he cried, his expression growing calmer. "So what you mean is: 'I am Otto Babendiek, who wishes to become a pupil,' or, in participial form, 'I am the boy calling himself Otto Babendiek, who wishes to become a pupil'?"

As my uncle had no intention of speaking again, and was nudging me, I was obliged to venture another shot; so I asked when I should come to be examined.

He had settled himself in a chair in front of his desk, and, stuffing some more powder up his nose, had apparently forgotten all about me.

So once more I had come to a full stop!

My uncle laughed softly, and actually sang the first line of his song; while I, once more on the point of tears, wondered how I could re-frame my question.

After a while, the old man, looking blankly at the wall in front of him, observed: "A nice business it would be if everybody wanted to be examined separately . . . just imagine what it would mean!"

My uncle urged me to have another shot.

At last in a trembling voice I asked: "When must those boys come who wish to be examined for admittance into the first form?"

"Boys wishing to be examined for the first form," he replied, still looking blankly before him, "must present themselves in the first form room at eight o'clock to-morrow."

And then we were allowed to go.

As we were descending the stairs, my uncle looked at me out of the corner of his eyes and said: "Did you cough last night?"

Possibly owing to the emotions provoked by what I had been through, I was looking rather frail. But I remember his question well, for I probably gathered from his tone of voice that he had some secret reason for asking.

I was tired out, and for the first time, I believe, repaired without hesitation to the dilapidated easy-chair. In any case, I was curled up in it, when suddenly, through the open window, which was high up in the wall, there appeared the spare form of the apprentice. In the twinkling of an eye he had sprung up and was sitting on the window-sill, looking down on me, and addressing me. As during all these days nobody had spoken to me—least of all a friendly word—I was overjoyed, and looked gratefully up at him.

Turning his little round head with its sad eyes towards me, he asked me whether I felt any qualms about the morrow.

I was surprised that one who had hitherto been so silent should open the conversation in this way, and I replied that I hoped all would go well.

"Oh!" he said, with a shake of his little head, "poor thing, don't you believe it!" And he proceeded to tell me that, in the first place, there were two peasant louts who came every day during term time to take their midday meal with my uncle. When I confessed that I knew nothing about them, he replied sadly: "That's just it, you don't know what you're in for! Your uncle talks a lot of twaddle to them, because their people are rich, and they sometimes bring him a little bread and bacon. They do just exactly what they like, so you can imagine how the louts torment me!"

He explained that they bullied him, pulled his stool away when he was going to sit down, and so on, and declared that he was often tempted to stick his cobbler's knife into their stomachs just to see what was inside them.

I asked him what he knew about the school.

"Well, in the first place," he began, "there's old Nick."

When I asked him whom he meant, he replied, "The headmaster."

I was shocked to hear the old man called such a name.

"Old Nick," he added, "is mad."

"Surely not!" I exclaimed with bated breath.

"Mad!" he repeated, pointing at his brow a finger blackened by pitch. "And the second master is always three sheets in the wind."

When I asked him what this meant he looked at me with his sad eyes, and explained that he was always drunk. "After a good drink," he proceeded, "his hand trembles, and he can't aim straight. But when he is not quite drunk—whiz!" and he spat in his hands and struck out with his arms.

As I gathered from his doleful expression and from what he had already told me that the other teachers were probably not up to much either, I did not wish to hear anything more, and asked him how he liked his own trade.

He did not like it at all. In fact he loathed it and wanted to run away and become a confectioner. He looked so unhappy that I was filled with pity for him. He told me that his mother had had heaps of children, though nobody knew anything about his father. And now that his mother was dead he was at the mercy of the "clodhoppers" who were rearing his brothers and sisters, and who treated him with the utmost meanness, not even allowing him pockets to his trousers or shirts of adequate length. But his worst grievance was that they had apprenticed him to my uncle.

"To your uncle, the greatest scoundrel in the town," he added. "I say it, although he is your uncle! What do we have to eat? Nothing but potatoes! And just look at this!" And pulling up his dirty sleeve he showed me innumerable little pinpricks all over his arm and elbow. "That's what he does, when we are at work, with his awl. Without a word—the dog! At least seven times a day. . . . What do you say—shall I run away to Hamburg one night?" And he described a detailed plan of flight.

I applauded his idea and said that in his place I should certainly do so. And I was not lying, as the sequel will show.

Allowing his sad eyes to wander over my poor room, he shook his head and in tones of deep despair said it would be impossible. The clodhoppers would communicate with all the mayors and police of the country and he would be caught and brought back. And when he thought of that he saw things very black indeed. But he was seriously contemplating setting fire to the house, and reminded me that I could easily escape by jumping out of the window, and then there would be an end to hunger and pricks from the awl.

When he mentioned the pricks with the awl again—as a matter of fact I had seen what happened without really taking it in—I was in a mood to agree with everything he said, and thought it only right that he should burn the house down.

But this idea too he abandoned, saying he was not crafty enough, and would be sure to be caught. He thought it would be better to write to the clodhoppers to tell them how matters stood. In fact, he had a letter already drafted, and pulling it from his pocket, he showed it to me.

After reading the letter, I urged him most emphatically to send it, and at first he resolved to do this; but in the end he decided to think it over a little while longer. Whereupon, hearing the front door open, he slid down from the sill and vanished.

I fell asleep and dreamt of my parents and of home, and of little Almut, who I believed had a place in her heart for me, although I knew she was going to marry Fritz and was fonder of Hans than of me.

On the following morning I woke to find myself once more on my ragged litter, which I was to show to no one, and remembered that my uncle had forbidden me under threat of punishment to take anyone to my room. If I received visitors, I was to take them to the best room, with its musty smell, where the luxurious bed and the large desk stood on show.

. . . . .

The next day the first sight that caught my eye was two big boys reining in their horses beneath my window.

One was short, fat, and slow; the other tall, thin, and fair.

The latter had a tame jackdaw, which perched now on his cap, then on his satchel, and anon behind him on his horse's back. They dismounted, led their animals to a little shed, and went to the workshop, where they devoured their rich sandwiches, while my uncle, Paul Sooth, and I consumed our frugal meal of potatoes. The fat, easy-going one, who bore a striking resemblance to his plump chestnut horse, chewed away, staring stolidly in front of him. He hardly spoke at all, and when he did so it was only to scoff at one of us three, or to laugh at some remark of my uncle's, or of his tall thin friend, and to assure us on this first morning of term that he did not care a rap for the school or anybody in it, and was only going to stop until he had been confirmed. The other boy, the fair one with the jackdaw, attracted me very much, and I watched him surreptitiously, almost devouring him with my eyes. In the first place I was puzzled by his relationship to the jackdaw. Without his uttering a word, or, as far as I could see, making any sign, it seemed to do exactly what he wished. Although I did not feel I liked him, I could not stop looking at him, for the greeny grey eyes in his thin face had a curious squint, which seemed to be reflected in his mind. Although he looked just a young daredevil of a schoolboy, he spoke with the wisdom and dignity of an adult, and while he treated his companion more or less as an equal, or at least as a grown-up son, he addressed my uncle as if the latter were his great-grandchild. As for me, he vouchsafed me not a word—I might have been a baby in long clothes, or a tadpole. Yet I thought he observed me with a certain not unkindly interest.

Presently the two boys got up, threw their satchels over their shoulders, and left the house, without acknowledging my existence by a word; and with my heart full of dread I followed some distance behind them, going out alone to meet my unknown and apparently terrifying fate.

For three or four days—it may have been weeks—I was in a state of utter bewilderment, bewilderment so complete that I still cannot understand why I did not come to grief. Strange streets, strange spaces, staircases, passages, and rooms! One of the latter full of extraordinary glasses, instruments, and pictures! A large hall full of hundreds of new faces! And the teachers all oddities, with one of them drunk on the first day! Over and above this, my first encounter with Latin! I fancy

I felt everything more keenly, more intimately, and more deeply than the others, and was therefore more timid and easily frightened. Whereas outwardly I appeared quite calm and collected, I was as terrified and excited as if I were standing on the edge of a volcano. Never have I suffered such tortures of suspense and anxiety. As a child of not quite ten years of age, I had suddenly been flung from the quietest of seaside villages into this broad torrent, which I believed to be as deep as it was broad.

In this sea of strange faces where were the timid eyes of a bewildered youngster to rest? I sought and sought, and was overjoyed when among the bigger boys of fifteen I espied the tall, thin figure and small freckled face I had already seen in my uncle's workshop. The apprentice had already told me that the big boy's name was Balle Bohnsack.

In the big boots I had brought with me from my village, and my coarse woollen home-made suit, I stood a lonely little figure apart. But I was ambitious, and longed to be noticed by the bigger boys—quite a laudable aim. And, strange to say, my wish was fulfilled. Two or three of the bigger boys and some of the masters came up to me, and began asking me where I came from, where I lived, and who had made my jacket, which was cut so outlandishly in the small of the back. I felt they were making fun of me, though not unkindly. There was something in my face and in my deep-set, dark blue eyes—a certain precocity perhaps—which attracted people and made them wonder what sort of answers I would give. I looked apprehensively up at them, and answered timidly, but with profound sincerity and truthfulness. I have never had any inclination to scoff or mock, and at that age I could not have possessed any sense of humour. Even now I can see nothing funny about myself as a small boy with trustful, earnest eyes.

Even Balle Bohnsack noticed me occasionally, and gave me a friendly nod—winking condescendingly, it is true; but it was kind of him. Once he came up to me and told me in a grandfatherly way to "spit in the old man's face"—he meant my uncle. But though I knew the advice to be well meant, and was grateful to him, I had not the smallest intention of following it. There was one proud, good-looking boy who for a long while never noticed me, and I hardly expected him to. He was well dressed; his figure was slim and aristocratic, and the clear eyes in his handsome face looked with calm assurance on the world. I found myself constantly staring at him, but though I seemed to know his face I searched in vain for any recollection of having met him before in my short life.

I could see no reason why he should notice me or speak to me, for he looked so serene and self-sufficient. But one day he did address me—probably he had noticed how timidly and reverently my observant eyes rested on him. Laying his hand on my shoulder, he asked me whether I was happy at school and found the work easy. His other hand was in his jacket pocket, and I heard him jingling some coins. Gazing into his proud, classical features, I felt so overjoyed I hardly knew how to answer. Henceforward the days on which he spoke to me were always red-letter days in my life. I did not know his name, nor did I care. Besides, a bell rang and we all had to return to our class-rooms.

How vividly I can see myself sitting at one of the desks. How anxiously and cautiously I observed the masters, and what extraordinary ideas I formed about them! The headmaster came in. For some reason which I could never fathom—probably because he liked to flaunt his senile folly before the smaller boys—he sometimes gave our form a lesson. I believe we all knew that he was mad; but it only made it the more appalling to be in his hands. How frightened I was! How terrified! I did all I could not to attract his eye, so as not to provoke one of his insane questions, and wondered why such a post had been given to him of all people! Our Latin master was a pedantic woebegone creature; all he could do was to spout Latin quotations or give vent to spiteful and angry remarks. Our scripture master was consumptive; it was dreadful to see him retire to a corner and expectorate, and then strain his sick lungs to propound his hollow learning. He was also very ugly, and used to lean over us to see whether we tried to cheat by using cribs or notes. I was terrified of him; but it was his ugliness much more than his illness that frightened me. As for our mathematics master, I need only say that he always got dead drunk every night—at least so my friends assured me—and came to school in the morning with a flaming face and dishevelled hair, and gradually worked himself sober by thrashing us in rows at a time.

My uncle was never more cheerful or full of song than when the two "peasant louts" were present, though he kept a sharp eye on their sandwiches, and quickly seized and devoured all they left behind. He never dreamt of giving Sooth or me a crumb. As long as they were eating—and I had never seen anybody eat with such appetite—they left us in peace; but when they had finished they occasionally talked to us, Balle Bohnsack opening the conversation in his usual grandfatherly manner.

One day, beckoning me with a wink, he stood me, as he often did, between his knees, while his jackdaw, perched on his shock-head, seemed to be building a nest in his hair. Gazing at me with his dull-witted eyes, he questioned me about my home and my people. I noticed a faint pressure of his knees when I informed him that my father was dead. In reply to his questions, I told him all about the forge and Engel Tiedje. My heart beat with rapture when he praised the latter, and called him "a fine old cock," which I gathered from the gravity of his expression was meant as a compliment.

I can see myself now, standing reverently between his knees, as if they were the knees of God, and looking straight up into his face with my grave, melancholy eyes. The great coarse fellow seemed to understand what I was feeling, and though rough, was not unkind. It passed his comprehension that anyone who was not forced to do so should dream of attending the grammar school. When I told him that I wanted to learn all I could, he burst into a torrent of abuse of the school, and, while the jackdaw appeared to be making arrangements to lay an egg in his hair, assured me that he would rather be a night watchman in his native village than go to that —— school. He said all this without any sign of emotion, and in such grandfatherly tones that I could not help believing him.

My uncle could not bear to see us talking in such a friendly way, or to be left out of the conversation. He was eaten up with envy and malice. In his thin bleating voice he interjected his own remarks, giving a comical description of his talk with me in the forge, and saying that I was still hesitating whether to be an Arctic explorer or a ventriloquist.

Balle was amused; but when my uncle saw that things were going smoothly for me he was furious, and his arms and legs twitched. "He looks small and delicate," he piped in his falsetto voice, "but I tell you he's as tough as he can be and as cunning as a fox! And good reason for why—— His mother——"

I guessed what my uncle was going to say, and suddenly for the first time in my life was tortured by the fear of being made to look ridiculous. Turning pale, I gazed imploringly at my uncle. "Please, Uncle Peter, don't tell them!" I begged. He was highly delighted at my discomfiture. "Why ever not?" he exclaimed.

Again I pleaded with him, calling him "dear Uncle Peter." Whereupon Balle clinched the matter for that day by saying: "He's really terrified, and you ought not to tell. Hold your tongue, you old beast!"

But my uncle now knew my most sensitive spot. I sometimes wonder why he did not thrash me oftener, though God knows I gave him little enough cause. But though the pricks on Sooth's arm seemed to indicate the contrary, physical torture may not have appealed to him. At all events, he was certainly a past master in the art of spiritual torment, and knew no pity.

The other youth, the fat one, constantly referred to my secret, and urged my uncle to reveal it. Between his mouthfuls he would dig my uncle in the ribs and mumble, "Do tell us!" And my uncle would begin to say something hinting at its nature.

Thank God, I have never experienced such torture since! Proud, sensitive atom that I was, my life became an agony of dread, which found its echo even in my dreams. Maybe I suffered more than I need have done, because it made not only me but also my mother appear ridiculous, and she was a saint in my eyes. For weeks I endured this torture. Meanwhile I had been fully initiated into the life of the school, and knew what it would mean if my uncle divulged my secret.

One day when the fat youth and my uncle were tormenting me as usual Balle curtly told them to shut up ; but although my uncle deemed it advisable not to continue, he sold my secret to the fat youth for a few pence. And I remember how, on the following morning at the beginning of recreation, the news spread over the playground. There was a regular uproar. At least fifty boys collected round me, staring at me and telling each other in our dialect: "Look, there's the chap who had his mother's breast until he was six years old!"

Some felt my arms, and marvelled that I was not stronger. Others asked me whether I could get on without mother's milk yet, or whether the school kept a wet-nurse or a goat for me. One or two of the bigger boys came up and, looking at me in astonishment, declared that I was a prodigy, and that they had never heard of anybody being so spoilt. Then, shaking their heads, they passed on.

The excitement lasted for days. Even the good-looking boy saw me standing in the middle of the howling throng, and I noticed that when he looked at me he turned quickly away and began to talk to his companion. But I was not surprised. It never occurred to me that he ought to stand up for me. He was big and rich, handsome and smart, and I was only a little boy and the son of a blacksmith. Nevertheless I felt depressed—not because he had ignored me, but because life and the world should have forced him to do so. In vain did I search for Balle Bohnsack. Did I expect him to help me? I don't know. But I longed to see his slim form, his small, sallow face and his squint, and to hear the sound of his calm, superior voice. But he was nowhere to be found. Eventually his fat friend informed me that he had been bitten in the face by a pet fox, and could not come to school.

So when I got back to my room I brought out the card Engel Tiedje had put in my jacket and resolved to send it to him, and tell him that I wanted to give up school and become his apprentice. However, I did not do so, but instead wrote on a card, "I have no wish to live," and, laying it where my uncle would see it, I left the house. I wanted to frighten him. I wanted to relieve my mind. The boys had only been teasing me, but for one of my tender age it had been a cruel ordeal. I stood outside the house, and watched my uncle pick up the card and read it. He laughed silently. Had he engineered the whole thing to make me so miserable that I would put an end to my life? It never occurred to me that it was the thought of inheriting the house and the land that was giving him so much pleasure. I was too young to know anything about the ghastly depths of his soul. Yet I was not angry with him. I merely thought he was possessed by some evil spirit, and pitied him.

At last, three days later, Balle turned up again. His nose was enveloped in plaster, his hair was all dishevelled, his clothes were untidy and his leggings covered with mud. The boys went up to him and asked him about his wound. If any other boy had come to school looking as he did he would have been mercilessly chaffed, but he settled the whole matter at once by saying in his deliberate way, with a grandfatherly wave of the hand, "Oh, it's nothing!"

Then they told him about the joke they had had at my expense. We all stood round him—about thirty of us—I looking anxiously up into his face. He did not move a muscle, but dropping his usual dialect, replied slowly: "I say, you fellows, you mustn't do that! You see, every time you tease him about it he thinks of his father and mother, and his father is dead, while his mother—well, she's queer. . . . No, you mustn't do that."

These few words from Balle put an end to the whole business. After this Balle would lay his thin, freckled hand from time to time on my shoulder, and talk to me in his grandfatherly way, while I beamed with joy. For the first few weeks I only listened, but gradually I plucked up courage, and began to ask him all sorts of questions, which he answered with his usual grown-up calm and dignity. One day he told me about his father's farm and his people. I was walking along the road with him as he led his horse. And he discussed his future. I thought he wanted to be a lion-tamer, because he was so clever with animals; but he assured me that his ambition was to be a clergyman. Knowing what a poor scholar he was, I ventured to remark that he would not find it at all easy; and this he was quite ready to admit. I stammered that he would have to preach sermons. Again he agreed, but said he would buy three books of them, and run through them once every three years, and then start again. For a moment I imagined he was wondering whether it would not be better to choose another calling, and I gathered from his mutterings that he was hesitating between that of a lion-tamer and a cattle-breeder. But at last he remarked emphatically, with a slow significant shake of his eighteen-year-old head: "No, my boy, it'll have to be a clergyman!"

So saying, he swung himself into his saddle, and made an almost imperceptible movement with his shoulder. I swear he did not utter a sound, for I was on the alert; neither did he glance at the tree where his jackdaw was perched. All he did was to make that faint movement with his shoulder, and the jackdaw flew on to the horse's croup, and he rode away.

CHAPTER IV

I Make New Acquaintances

I CANNOT remember how or when it was, but one morning learned in the playground that the proud, handsome boy whom I secretly admired so much was Fritz Hellebeck!

Oh, if only I had never seen him! If only I had never seen him!

I remember feeling very proud of having visited his home and family and at his having spoken to me once in the playground; and the fact that he had not stood up for me when I was in trouble never, as I have pointed out, struck me as anything else than natural and proper. I never dared to address him, but followed him about and gazed at him, hoping that one day he would notice me again. I also hoped I might hear something about my little friend Almut and his half-brother; but my one desire was that he should become friendly to me. As a child I was inclined to hero-worship, and God knows I thought him a hero.

One day, when school was over, I saw him walking ahead of me, and made up my mind to run past him and look at him, so as to catch his eye if possible. But I had to wait a bit, for he had a schoolfellow with him, an enormously fat, fair-headed boy called Dutti Kohl, an effeminate creature who was generally disliked. Dutti usually put his arm round the shoulder of any boy he happened to be walking with; but he did not dare to behave in such a familiar way with Fritz Hellebeck. All the same they were an ill-assorted couple, though I believe it was this very fact that gave me the courage to address my hero.

As soon as Dutti Kohl went into his father's shop I ran up to the handsome youth and with beating heart asked for news of his friend Almut and his brother Hans.

He was surprised that I knew his people, and put his hand on my shoulder, and while it rested there I was in the seventh heaven. He recognized me as the little blacksmith's boy about whom his mother had written to him, and overcome with joy I told him about my visit to the dean.

"I know," he replied, jingling some coins in his pocket as we went along; "little Almut wrote and told me all about it."

We talked about his people, and when we reached my street-door he let his hand drop from my shoulder. With a smile in his fine eyes, he was about to walk on, when he hesitated and, eyeing me slowly up and down, said spontaneously: "You may speak to me whenever you see me, and walk with me."

I was proud to feel that I belonged to him, and looked up at him with infinite respect. Little idiot that I was, I never missed an opportunity of going up to him in the playground, so as to show every one that I knew him. If I met him alone in the street I would walk with him. But our conversation never turned for long on my affairs; he soon directed it upon himself, and generally ended up with some self-conceited boast. He talked cleverly, leaving a great deal to be implied; but that is the impression I obtained. He used to tell me that his farm consisted of hundreds of valuable acres, that his mother had money to invest, and that the farm would be even larger when he married little Almut, as he intended to do. Incidentally he would mention the handsome monthly allowance he received from his mother, adding that he was hard up, all the same, because his expenses were so heavy. Then he would discuss his schoolfriends and the girls with whom he used to go out for walks and drink chocolate—they all had extremely wealthy or distinguished fathers. I noticed that he never mentioned Almut, except to boast about the acres she would bring him, and that whenever we met a girl, even if she were only eight years old, he would pull himself up and look extremely dignified. I did not understand that it was only the infinite reverence and devotion he read in my eyes that made him tolerate me as a listener; for I was spellbound by his handsome personality, his fine, confident voice, and his affable manner to everybody. He struck me as the incarnation of all that was fine in body and mind, a youth who was entitled to 'talk big' because he was big; and I loved him without criticizing him.

One day when I was passing my uncle's house with him he suddenly took it into his head to walk in, casually remarking that he wanted to see how I lived. Of course I took him into the best room, as my uncle had bidden me, and he installed himself comfortably on the couch.

He talked to me about his mother and the letters he received from her. "My mother is doing all she can for me at home," he observed. "She's got everybody in leading-strings . . . and all for me! I really don't know what she wouldn't do for me!" And when, to please him, I referred contemptuously to Hans, he added: "Did you know that all our property comes from Hans's mother? But my mother got round my father to leave the largest and most valuable part of the farm to me before he died. And I bet you," he continued with a smile, "that my mother will manage to get the bit that still belongs to Hans for me as well—you know, the tumbledown house in the wood, and that field on the slope."

"You'll get that, anyway," I observed, "because your mother told us that Hans would never marry."

He gave a sly, knowing smile. "Oh, well," he said, "she tells him that because she is a very clever woman. She twists them all round her little finger."

"But you have power over men too, just like your mother!" I exclaimed, eager to please him.

He seemed delighted, and, passing a hand through his hair, put the other on my shoulder. "Do you know," he said, "if I liked, I could make appointments with seven girls every evening, and, what's more, they would all come."

"But you love Almut most of all, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes, perhaps," he rejoined carelessly. "But that's another matter. A hundred and seventy acres is not to be sneezed at, my boy! My mother and I often talk about it."

I was overwhelmed by the thought of such wealth, and, remembering ugly fat Dutti Kohl, I could not help asking him why he associated with him.

He protested that he did not precisely associate with him. "I sometimes condescend to put up with him," he explained, "because his governor occasionally lends me money."

I showed my astonishment. He proceeded to inform me that, although his mother gave him a large allowance, there were times when he needed a little more. "Besides," he added, "it is amusing to go to a fellow like that." And he then told me that Dutti Kohl's father ran a moneylending business in addition to his glassware shop. "Funny people!"

He stood up as if to go, but proceeded to wander round the room examining everything. On reaching the desk, he lifted its rounded top with the assurance and idle curiosity of a well-to-do young man, and exclaimed when he saw a pile of three-mark pieces. Counting them with careless ease, and finding there were eleven, he weighed them in his hand, returned them to their place, and closed the lid. Whereupon he left.

All this time I was leading a wretched existence. I never felt satisfied. Sometimes I found a little bread and some butter in the parcels of underclothing Engel Tiedje used to send me; but the moment they arrived my uncle would come into the room with the large bread-knife, and, pretending that he was short of butter, he would take a large portion or the whole of it away. Winter was approaching, and besides being always hungry I began to feel miserably cold. I used to wrap the old grey blanket round me as far as it would go, but I could only get warm when I made it into a sort of sack. Circumstances also compelled me to be careless about my person. For weeks I never took off my underclothes, and felt desperately uncomfortable. When I told my uncle that I felt the cold, he asked me whether I was coughing; and when I told him that I was not, he seemed to lose all interest in the matter.

School was the terror of my existence. I was bowed down with a feeling of purposelessness and misery, and was in a constant state of fear. My particular bane was the headmaster, who behaved kindly if somewhat oddly to all the well-to-do boys, but had nothing but spite and insults for the poorer ones. How he used to scoff at my village clothes—probably because he knew that he wounded me most by making fun of my poverty and consequently of my parents!

When school was over I had to go home and do all the washing-up for the day at the scullery sink at the back of the workshop. As soon as customers came in I had to stop at once, and not make a sound, and the moment I had finished repair to my room on tiptoe. If I dropped anything, or took too long, or if my uncle happened to be in a bad temper, he would strike out with his bony claw-like hands, not caring where he hit me. A walk in the streets, alone or with a schoolfriend—more often than not in the direction of Stormfeld—brought my day almost to a close; and I would return home, learn my lessons, and go in search of my share of our scanty supper, to which, by the by, I was never called.

There were happier intervals when Balle Bohnsack took me between his knees and talked to me in his strange way, with his jackdaw perching on his shoulder and imitating the expression in his master's eyes to a nicety. Fritz Hellebeck too was always friendly to me. Sometimes he would turn up quite unexpectedly, and bursting into the best room, would sit and talk, enveloped in the incense of my admiration and respect. Before he left he always opened the desk, which I never dared to touch myself, and would pick up the pile of three-mark pieces, let them lie aslant in his hand, and count them. The number was different every time, and he would comment on how extraordinarily careless Uncle Peter was with his money.

One day as I was crossing the market-place I heard Dutti Kohl's heavy, shuffling footsteps behind me. To my astonishment he flung his fat arm round my shoulder and dragged me into his father's shop. Grateful though I was for any sign of friendship from an older boy, I could not help shuddering at the contact of his flabby body and his great fat hand.

On the other side of the counter, which was full of fancy goods, two country servant-girls were haggling over a vase of silvered glass. To my surprise, Dutti immediately took part in the discussion, and addressed the girls as if they were his own age. I sat down shyly on the edge of a chair. Presently, when the girls had finished their business, they left the shop, the prettier of the two blushing deeply at all the compliments she had received. Dutti and his father then sat down in front of me on the sofa, and old Kohl immediately began bewailing the stupidity of his customers. "It is really sad, Dutti," he said, "to see people throwing away their hard-earned money so light-heartedly!"

I was surprised, for only a moment previously I had heard him waxing most eloquent in praise of his goods. But I did not reveal my feelings.

"No," he went on, "there is no end to their carelessness!"

"Yes," Dutti agreed, with the same grave and distressed expression, "it's shocking! How can such girls ever come to any good?"

"It is terribly sad," said his father, shaking his head, "that people should let themselves be fooled like that! When I am no longer of this world, Dutti, mind that it does not happen to you." Whereupon he began questioning me about Hellebeck's farm, which he had been told I had visited—asking me how many horses, cows, children, etc., there were on it. And was it true that Fritz Hellebeck was going to marry a very rich girl?

With eyes shining guilelessly I readily answered all his questions, telling them all about Almut, how old she was and in what Arcadian surroundings she lived. I was surprised to see that, although they listened intently, they showed no enthusiasm. On the contrary, when I had finished, all old Kohl said was: "We must be careful; it would be better not to give him any more."

I paid no heed to the remark, and left the shop in high glee. I was delighted at having been able to sing the praises of people who, in my opinion, not only lived in Paradise, but lived together in paradisiacal peace. I was so happy, in fact, that it did not occur to me that I had been pumped, nor did I notice that Dutti's fat arm was about my shoulder as he led me to the door.

After that the podgy youth would sometimes put his fat arms round me on the way to or from school, and, hugging me to him, lead me along. Sometimes when a schoolfellow passed he would hug me more tightly and whisper: "Do you know, I could do for him if I liked!—Debts!" There was something stupefying and overpowering about him. I could not resist walking with him and listening to him. Occasionally he would stop a boy in the street and tell him that he must pay up or he would report him. When the boy anxiously begged for time he would let him go. Then, hugging me to his breast, he would say: "I must be hard, mustn't I? Otherwise they would be too careless, wouldn't they? Don't you think I'm right? Tell me, don't you think so? Oh, if only I hadn't such a tender conscience! But having a tender conscience I had to tell him."

I don't know whether I believed his chatter. But his great arm was about me, I was caught in his fat muscles and his oily voice, and with a sort of faint fascination I kept still and listened.

One day he discussed Fritz Hellebeck again, and asked how much I thought he owed. I suggested a sum which seemed to me fabulous. He laughed, and hugging me tighter than ever mentioned a sum five times as great. "And all for wine and chocolate!" he exclaimed.

Sometimes I would sit with him and his father and work with them. For, strange to say, neither of them knew any arithmetic. Division, above all, was a sealed book to them. But I knew how to do it. I sometimes suspected that Dutti only hugged me in his fat arm to lead me into the shop when there was division to be done; but I went all the same, for I spent some pleasant hours behind the counter there. Without either home or parents I felt at ease among that little circle of people who lived so peacefully together, and the large sandwich I was given when I had settled the prices of the goods by division made up for the filth of the place.

But my best friend, and the brightest light of my sunless and forlorn existence, was my fellow boarder, the apprentice.

Throughout the week I belonged to the grammar school and my schoolfellows. But on Sunday afternoons I was Paul Sooth's friend, and we used to walk out into the country together. Leaving the house separately, we would meet at some spot outside the town, and wander away together—he fifteen, I ten. These were the happiest hours of my life, because he confided in me entirely and laid bare his soul. I even knew the entire contents of his pockets, and all their valueless treasures. Talking about his brothers and sisters all the time, he kept his eyes steadily on the ground, hoping he might find something to give them. He knew that in their native village they were living a life of misery and want, and his one thought was how to improve their lot, and gradually free them from their bondage.

Whenever he mentioned the peasants of his native village, to whose care his brothers and sisters had been confided, he declared that he "saw things very black." He told me that once a farm-boy with whom they happened to be angry had been squeezed to death between a door and a wall, and spoke as if such things were common occurrences. And these were the kind of people for whom his brothers worked! Then, referring to my uncle, he said: "You see, he'll prod me to death one of these days!" And once more he showed me his arm covered with pricks.

We concluded that there was nothing for it but flight, and discussed ways and means of getting to Hamburg and thence setting sail for America with all his brothers and sisters. But we both cheered up a little when he read me the letter of complaint which he intended to send to the Sheriff. When he thought how little effect it would probably have, however, he began to cry again, and rub his eyes, so that his face grew quite black from the grease and pitch on his hands. Then he declared that I was the only human being in the world. All the rest were beasts, and he "saw things very black indeed."

Sometimes, quite of his own accord, he would begin to discuss my plight, and prophesy the blackest future for me. My uncle, he said, had no conscience, but merely a gap where his conscience ought to be. "You see," he concluded, "the time will come when he will set you down beside him at a last—and then . . ."

I replied that I hoped I should do better than that. But I was very much depressed notwithstanding.

Towards evening we returned to the town, and reached the little row of cottages in which my grandmother lived. There were always a number of old women there, smoking long pipes and drinking coffee, while the smoke hung in clouds beneath the low ceiling. At my age I could certainly not have understood all that was said; but there is a strange mystery about such things. I am convinced that during those twilight hours, when I used to sit in my grandmother's room, with Paul Sooth asleep beside me, I absorbed much which rose to the surface of my mind in after-years when I began to write. My grandmother told me a good deal about her own youth, about my father as a boy, and about my uncle. She said the former had been a good son to her, but that the latter was utterly worthless. But as a rule she spoke in plain, unequivocal terms of people and things I knew nothing about—of young women's troubles and fears, births in and out of wedlock, the joys and cares of having children, and of money, marriage, life and death.

Paul Sooth would sit asleep at my side, with his dark dishevelled head resting against the wall. But I sat with my large eyes and my mouth wide open, drinking in these sketches of life with insatiable eagerness, and when one of the old women exclaimed, "Just look, Trina, how his eyes are starting out of his head," I shrank back abashed.

I heard but little from home. An abyss seemed to cut me off. Engel Tiedje was either too shy to visit me or Uncle Peter had forbidden him to come. Yet I felt his love and care about me. Unfortunately his methods of communication were somewhat cumbersome. Not daring to send a letter through the post, he would scribble notes on scraps of paper, and entrust them to any carter or tramp who chanced to be coming to Steenkarken, with the result that when I was standing in the playground, during recreation, one of these dreadful fierce-looking people would suddenly appear and roar out my name. All the boys would stare, and I used to feel terribly uncomfortable. However, I would run over to my friend's messenger, snatch the grubby scrap of paper from his hand, thrust it quickly into my pocket, and when I was at home by myself I would read what my dear old friend said, with my eyes blinded by tears. Only once did he appear in person, and that was on a cold, raw November day. One of his friends who had been to Steenkarken had told him I was coughing, and, terrified to death, he had set out immediately. After walking for four hours on end, there he stood at the railings! I saw him, but pretended not to. Cowardly little wretch that I was, I took no notice of my best friend, the only friend I had in the world, in fact, for my dear mother was queer. There he stood, as broad as he was tall, with his huge hat almost touching his great round shoulders, and his arms hanging down to his knees, while his heavy boots, pulled over his trousers, were covered with clay. In his hand he held a parcel. After a while Balle Bohnsack caught sight of him, and went up to him; after which he came back to me, and said in his quiet way: "Hi, Otto, don't you see the old pantechnicon over there? There by the railings."

I pretended that I had only just seen him. "Oh, that's our old assistant!" I exclaimed, and we went over to him.

Balle Bohnsack's natural manner soon put Engel Tiedje at his ease, and, gazing at me with his loving, thoughtful eyes, he asked Balle whether I was coughing. Then, shaking me by the hand, he went away. On turning round I saw that a whole crowd of boys had collected, with two or three of the masters among them. The headmaster called me to him, and asked in a voice loud enough for all to hear—he did this on purpose, for he thought he was being funny or clever—who all the people were who were constantly talking to me from the railings. He thought they looked suspiciously like thieves or murderers. He had seen quite clearly the life-preserver under the coat of the last young fellow who had spoken to me, and also the child-murder scene tattooed on his arm. All this showed that my taste was atrocious and my circle of acquaintances deplorable. I replied gently and respectfully that my acquaintances were certainly neither thieves nor murderers, and that the short man I had just spoken to was our assistant. But in stentorian tones he declared that I ought to go to the doctor at once, with a boy to escort me on either side; for I was obviously blind if I could not see that my friends were a set of knaves and cut-throats.

. . . . .

As far as I remember I did not go to see my mother in Stormfeld for two whole years. Like a bird fascinated by the eyes of a serpent, I was held spellbound by the school and Uncle Peter, and did not dare to stir.

Possibly he forbade me to go, hoping that if my mother never saw me she would succumb all the sooner to her melancholia and adopt the course which he regarded as inevitable. There may have been other reasons for my not wishing to go home. Possibly when my father was lying in his coffin I may have seen a strange look in my mother's eyes, and, sensitive as I was, she became lost to me from that moment. In any case, I thank God that the picture my memory retained of her, after her death, was full of the loving, intelligent, and motherly expression which she always had before she fell ill. At all events, I spent my holidays in Steenkarken, and my uncle kept me busy cleaning the house, taking care to expose me to as many draughts as possible. But my chest was stronger than my father's.

When I was not free for this task, a neighbour used to come in. She was a big, portly, unattached female, who was always extremely agreeable to us all, but Balle Bohnsack thought she was insincere. He called her "the treacle-barrel," and ironically urged my uncle to marry her. But my uncle hesitated. "No, no," he would reply, "there might be children!" And he dreaded children more than anything. In vain did Balle assure him that she would have no children. My uncle did not like to take the plunge, but said he would wait another five years, when she would certainly not be able to have any, and then he might perhaps marry her. And muttering something in his squeaky voice he doubled up, delighted at his own cleverness.

In the course of the second year, when in the middle of the summer holidays I was engaged in cleaning the house, a letter arrived from Engel Tiedje.

He gave me all the Stormfeld news, told me about his work and about my mother and her persistent melancholia, and urged me to pay her a visit as soon as possible to cheer her up. He concluded with his usual confident prophecies about my glorious future, and once more implored me to come so that the sight of me might refresh my poor mother's soul.

I showed my uncle the letter, which he read eagerly, and his cold eyes suddenly brightened. "Aha!" he cried with characteristic brutality, "she is casting longing eyes at the rope!" He reflected a moment, glancing at me once or twice, probably to see what I looked like, and what impression his words had made. Oh, what a tragedy that children should be delivered up to the mercy of adults, whether good or bad, foolish or wise!

At last, having apparently satisfied himself that my visit, especially if he accompanied me, would aggravate rather than improve my mother's condition, he declared, to my deep regret, that he would go with me. But he warned me with threats not to make any complaints, adding that if I did I would only add to my mother's distress, as she could not possibly find anyone to provide for me as cheaply as he did.

Love, curiosity, and imagination urged me forward on that journey—though I fear my desire to see Engel Tiedje, the forge, and the sea-front was greater than any longing for my mother. My uncle's presence, however, damped my ardour, for as he walked beside me with his cold, vacant face all the flowers seemed to wither, the birds to stop singing, and the sun to go out.

When we arrived in the evening Engel Tiedje was hard at work outside. On seeing Uncle Peter, I could tell from his eyes that he was as bitterly disappointed as I had been, and he hardly greeted us. How differently he would have received me had I been alone!

Passing through the forge, I went in search of my mother. Uncle Peter wanted to come too, but some happy accident prevented him. So I went alone through the kitchen and timidly opened the door of my mother's room.

She was sitting in her usual place by the window, staring down at the floor, as if she were counting the boards. When she heard me, she looked up, and I saw her give a frightened start, as if she had been caught red-handed, when all the while it was only her loving child!

I went towards her, full of anxiety, dread, inquiry, and love. When I came up to her I saw a look in her eyes that prevented me from jumping into her arms, so I held out my hand, and she took it. In a low, timid voice I said I had come to see her, and asked her how she was.

But she left me standing before her, and repeated in confusion: "Oh . . . how I am . . . how I am. . . ."

My heart was breaking. Suddenly I burst into tears, and, throwing my arms round her neck, I pressed my face against hers. Once more she shrank away in fear—shrank from the love of her child! Then, laying a hand on my head, as it leant against her, she said, as if the matter were urgent: "You must be strong. Do you hear? You mustn't follow in my footsteps. Not in my footsteps! Now go—go to Engel and Uncle. I can do nothing for you." And as if she wished to shield me from the infection of her melancholy, and resist the temptation to take me along her own dark and fearsome path, she pushed me away, saying in a flurried, frightened voice: "Go! Go!"

It is impossible to describe what went through my childish soul. My mother had given me a stone for my love, and I was too small to understand how ill she was. With my arms still stretched out to her, I took a step or two back, and looked at her in bewilderment.

Then my uncle came in, and my mother started again, and I could see she was making an effort to pull herself together. "He hasn't been here for a long time," she said quickly and coldly, looking up at him.

"He had to work," Uncle Peter replied. "Isn't that so? You had to work, didn't you?"

I agreed; nor did I lie.

My mother in a low, monotonous voice remarked that perhaps it was just as well, and that it was best for her to be alone. She seemed to regard her melancholia as a form of guilt or crime.

Then I managed to creep out, leaving Uncle Peter with her. The bond between my dear mother and myself had snapped. I knew she was ill, ill, ill! But the memory of that day tortures me even now.

I went to find Engel Tiedje in the forge; but though we sat there for some time we could not talk properly, for our ears were glued to the kitchen door to catch a sound of Uncle Peter's voice. His presence in the house destroyed all the pleasure of this visit home.

It was a miserable week. No matter where I went, or where I was, Uncle Peter cast a gloom over everything. Whenever he went to my mother, he always sat opposite her and talked. What did he talk about? He must have tried to blacken her leaden sky. He must have spoken of my father and of the possibility of my own death, and confirmed her belief that I was delicate and would die young. I don't maintain that he did all this out of malice prepense; it was his nature. As soon as he opened his mouth a cloud covered one's eyes; when he looked up the sky grew overcast.

Towards evening on the fifth or sixth day, just as he came out and joined us in front of the forge, I had a feeling that I must overcome my fears and go at once to my mother. I was filled with vague qualms about her. But when I tried to pass by him he said it would be better to leave her alone. Then, taking up a position from which he could observe the whole house, he began to joke with the peasants in his squeaky voice. I remember that he kept his eyes constantly on the little path leading to our peat cellar, and that I wondered why he did so. But I could not see the path from where I was sitting.

In the midst of the laughing and joking I found an opportunity to walk casually past the front of the house, and cast a rapid glance up at the window. Yes, my mother was still sitting there, but on seeing my shadow she looked up, and her expression was strange, almost hostile. I was horrified. That could not be my mother!

My uncle called me back. Once more I was obliged to stand among the chattering crowd, and noticed that my uncle was still keeping a watch on the house. I was seized with unutterable fear, but was held spellbound by my uncle's eyes. I wanted to speak to Engel, and tell him to go to her; but he was on his knees absorbed in his work, and the sweat was pouring from his brow.

At last my overpowering fear gave me courage, and darting through the forge and the kitchen I reached my mother's room. She was not there! I felt—nay, I knew—that something terrible had happened! But, strange to say, I did not fly screaming to Engel and tell him what I suspected, or rather was certain of, but returned to the forge and sat for at least half an hour, pondering my trouble, a prey to the cruellest forebodings. Then, when all the peasants had gone, and Uncle Peter and Engel came in, I cried out in a voice that tore Engel's heart-strings:

"Where is my mother?"

He dashed past me, searched the whole house, and the lofts, and then, on going over to the peat cellar, found her—dead.

And now I seem to remember that the scene suddenly changed. Uncle Peter left us. Complaining of a headache, he started off that night for Steenkarken. Then neighbours appeared, and talked together in hushed tones. One after the other they went over to the peat cellar and came back shaking their heads in silence.

With my face buried in my hands I sat by the hearth, and now and again I felt a hand passed tenderly over my head. Then an old woman, who was our neighbour, came to fetch me, and I spent the next few days at her house. It was from her that I ultimately learnt that my mother had hanged herself.

On the third day I began to feel so miserable and lonely that I told Engel Tiedje I did not wish to remain any longer at the old woman's house, but would prefer to go to Mamsell Boehmke, a fat little woman with a permanent smile on her shiny plump cheeks, who made a living by sewing, ironing, looking after the peasants' houses when they went on an outing, and cooking for them when they gave a dinner.

But Engel Tiedje did not like the idea, and the anxious, hesitating expression I knew so well entered his eyes. Did I really wish to go to her—to Mamsell Boehmke? We discussed the matter while he was digging my mother's grave. I did not ask him what he was doing; but insisted on finding out why he did not want me to go to Mamsell Boehmke. I was used to his gratifying my smallest wish, and could not understand. He refused to speak out, merely hinting that ever since he had got rid of the warming-pan fiend he had done with women. I gathered that he was afraid Mamsell Boehmke was trying to hook him, and I observed that as a matter of fact I had noticed she had come to our front door three times on the previous day.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, casting a frightened glance up from the pit. "She wanted some red-hot coals for her stove. That's how it always begins. That's how it began with her over there," and he pointed across country.

When the grave was dug, we sat together for a while on the wall—it was a beautiful warm summer's day—and talked about our dear departed.

When we returned home I repeated my wish to go to Mamsell Boehmke, and on perceiving his confusion, promised that I would see that she did not bother him.

He shook his great dishevelled head and wiped the sweat from his brow. "It's a bad business, Otto, my boy," he said. "If we once start, there'll be no end to it. Small and round as she is, she's a dangerous creature."

In the end, however, I had my way and he took me there. She received me very kindly, and with a blush on her shiny cheeks begged Engel Tiedje to be seated; but, pleading urgent work, he managed to escape, and I was left alone with her. She reminded me of good, soft rich cake, and I sat in front of her while she sewed, watching her closely. When I had had enough of this, my eyes were attracted by a two-storied house made of black velvet, standing in the middle of her sewing-table, and she told me it was an exact reproduction of the Town Hall of Lüneburg. I thought it strange that the Town Hall of Lüneburg should be covered with velvet; but since she said it was so, I believed her, and held the belief for years.

Inside it I found the portrait of a fierce-looking man with a long, bushy moustache turned up at the ends, who, she proudly informed me, had once been her sweetheart. He was an artist—that is to say, a fire-eater and sword-swallower at fairs. But she could not tell me why he had not married her, or why he had been suddenly obliged to leave her to go on a journey and had never come back.

"And when he left you, Auntie Siene"—the children of the village all called her that; she was kind to them—"did he give you a souvenir?" I asked.

She nodded. "And a little baby as well," she replied. "But that died." And two glittering tears rolled down her cheeks.

I tried to comfort her, pointing out that after all the Town Hall was a beautiful souvenir. She agreed, saying it was the finest thing she possessed, and whoever married her would have to promise to treasure it.

As I thought the conversation was drawing dangerously near to Engel Tiedje, I changed the subject by asking her to tell me about the artist. She did so, but eventually came to a point when she described him as having had a very broad, squat figure, adding that she liked men who were broad and squat, and had no wish to conceal her weakness.

Again I felt that we were approaching too close to Engel Tiedje, and picking up a book which I found in the velvet casket I asked her what it was. She explained that it was an account-book, and that everything in life depended upon keeping good accounts. She knew, for instance, of a house, not a hundred miles from where we were sitting, where there was also an account-book, but it was an account-book in name only. If ever she had the opportunity—one could never tell—of getting that account-book into her hands, she would put it in order, and then that house would flourish, just as hers did. Suspecting that the book in question was one I had valued all my life, and that it lay inside the desk in the forge, I concluded that we were again approaching forbidden ground, and refused to go on. I even tried to be nasty to her and sulk. But she was so kind, giving me such a beautiful supper, and tucking me up in such a motherly, affectionate way in a gigantic bed, that I could not do so.

On the next day the funeral took place. I followed the coffin with Engel Tiedje, my little hand in his great big one, and the whole village seemed to be walking behind us. But I saw no clergyman and heard no bell tolling, and when I asked Engel Tiedje about this, he did not like to tell me that the Church denied these privileges to suicides.

My poor darling sick mother! If I had had my way—I who had seen her dear eyes look anxiously out into the night—I should have had all the bells in the land tolling to turn what seemed her shame into her honour!

I stayed two or three days longer in Stormfeld, but I left Mamsell Boehmke, and lived at the forge, talking to Engel Tiedje and having my meals with him, and even sleeping in his room. Once Auntie Siene called on us, and offered her help; but unfortunately just as she arrived Engel Tiedje happened to be very busy with the bellows and the tongs, and made so much noise that her voice was completely drowned, and she was obliged to retire in confusion.

Then the holidays came to an end, and I had to return to Steenkarken. Engel took me as far as the mill on the crest of the hill, and there we took leave of each other. Not a word about Uncle Peter and my wretched plight at his house had passed my lips. He would not have known what to do. And so with a face calm and grave beyond my years I once more turned northward.

CHAPTER V

I Get into a Scrape

A FEW days after I got back Fritz Hellebeck came to call on me. It was just an ordinary visit, but it struck me that he was less confident and less boastful than usual. He seemed uneasy, and constantly lapsed into thoughtful silence. After we had talked for some time he asked me for a book he had lent me, so I went to my room to fetch it, and shortly afterwards he left, with the book under his arm.

On the following afternoon a sixth-form boy appeared at my uncle's house. He was a short, bloodless creature with lifeless features and thin white hands that looked cadaverous. He was very unpopular because he curried favour with the headmaster, and was a sort of executioner-in-chief to him. He forced his way into my room, and I offered him a chair. But the wizened youth remained standing at the door, and, looking round the room, observed without a sign of emotion: "Your uncle has reported you to the headmaster for having stolen eleven talers from his desk. To avoid a scandal the affair is to be hushed up, and no one will know anything about it. But you must go away quietly . . . on some excuse or other, and take to your heels."

My God! I can still see the wizened youth, standing there, with his vacant eyes, and his vacant soul, gazing round my room, as he pronounced sentence of death on a defenceless child. I believe that while he was delivering his terrible message he was actually examining the festoons of wallpaper which the damp had stripped from the walls. He even looked at one of the pictures, and remarked that it was spotted.

I forget what I felt, thought, or did, when the world seemed to have burst above my head, leaving me breathless and defenceless beneath the fragments. I don't know whether I troubled to wonder who could have taken the money; nor can I remember whether it occurred to me that this might be a second attempt on my uncle's part to get rid of me. Did it ever enter my head that he might have put the money there so that one day in my poverty and hunger I might be tempted to take it, and in despair follow in the black footsteps of my mother? Or that he himself might have taken the money, or my hero, Fritz Hellebeck? I don't believe I thought at all. All I knew was that I was utterly defenceless.

Frightened to death, I sat waiting in despair, staring in front of me and unconsciously moaning until dusk. Then my uncle came in, and sitting on the edge of the table looked down on me as I cowered in the chair that was my bed. His thin, pinched features glowed with a cold and cruel satisfaction quite out of keeping with his lamentations at losing his money. "Eleven talers!" he cried. "Fine old talers, hard-earned. Stolen . . . and by my nephew! By my last remaining relative, whom I had taken to my heart and home!"

I said faintly that I had not taken them. I did not dare to say more.

He opened his eyes wide and they were terrible to behold. I have looked into the eyes of lunatics and criminals and always found a vestige of humanity. Never since that day have I seen the eyes of a beast in a human face.

"Who did, then?" he rejoined. "I perhaps? Do you wish to bring shame on my grey hairs? It would be just like you. Or Fritz Hellebeck, the richest, handsomest boy in the town? Who would believe you? Or Paul Sooth? But I can guarantee that he has never set foot in that room."

Again I protested faintly that I had not done it. But I felt so solitary and helpless that my denials sounded timid and I could add nothing to them.

He proceeded to asseverate passionately that he only wanted to help me, although I had stolen his precious talers. But he had turned the matter over in his mind again and again, and was at his wits' end. What did I propose? What had I in mind? Obviously I could not stay at the grammar school! My school-friends and the masters would all point the finger of scorn at me!

I said nothing; I knew he was right.

He continued in the same strain, saying he had racked his brains to find a way out, but in vain. If I thought of apprenticing myself to Engel Tiedje was I sure he would have me? Has a thief the right to be sheltered at all? Besides, who would bring a horse or a plough to me? It was also impossible for me to turn to my relatives in Ballum or Buchholz. Everybody would have heard of my disgrace. What hope was there for a boy of ten who was already a thief? If he himself had been guilty of such a crime—if one could imagine such a thing—he would not have been able to endure life a moment longer. He would have said good-bye to life altogether. The river Au would have provided the only escape, just where the sixth-form boys bathed, where it was deepest. That was where he would have gone in my place. But people were different! . . . He could not understand how I could sit there, not even crying!

I listened without saying a word. God alone knows what I was thinking about! But I am certain now that he had expected me to follow close in my parents' footsteps, and either fall a victim to chest trouble like my father, or to melancholia like my mother, and that it would do no great harm to hasten matters a little. But nature had been kind to me. I possessed my father's love of life and my mother's constitution. Thus I managed to escape my uncle's toils, in spite of all his broad hints, and, discovering a means of escape, I made my way into the outside world.

My uncle left me, and I quickly turned my back on the house. Dusk was falling. I must have wandered about the market-place for some time, not knowing what to do. Then I ran into Fritz Hellebeck, walking with two girls and talking with great animation. He did not see me. But when I pressed myself on his notice, he threw back his fine head and greeted me in his usual friendly way, which always made me so happy. How strange and terrible that he should imagine he was conferring a favour on me—me, his victim—with his friendly greeting! Then he went on, jingling the money in his pockets—the money which . . .

I felt I wanted to enter the Kohls' shop. They seemed different from other people, or possibly it was the warmth of their room that attracted me. As usual I found father and son seated at the table. They were busy counting petty cash, and exchanged a rapid glance which informed me that they knew all. Keeping his seat, Dutti put his fat arm about me and hugged me tenderly, "Well, how are you, little Babendiek?" he asked.

I wanted them to talk about my affair, for I had come to this room, in which money matters were constantly discussed, partly in the hope of obtaining advice on that subject.

Dutti's father held forth as usual about the frivolity of the masses, who were always buying things they did not want. "But," he continued, "what I cannot understand is that certain people who have money, who I know have money, do not come to buy things from me. If they must get rid of their money and wish to be frivolous, why on earth don't they come to me?"

I remarked softly that I had no money, and had never had any. Then, as Dutti changed the subject, I ventured to broach my question.

"I have got into debt," I said in a low, timid voice, standing with his arm still round me. "Can you lend me the money?" (I named the sum.) "I will give it back as soon as possible."

Hugging me more tightly and affectionately than ever he replied that while it was true they lent money, and were quite willing to do so, they had to have some sort of security. Their honest Holstein consciences absolutely forbade any other method, much as they would have loved to help me.

I was silent for a moment, hopelessly seeking a way out; then I asked gently: "Has Fritz paid his debts?" My object in asking was to get him to back my own loan, if he had settled his account.

Once more father and son looked at each other, and Dutti, who was the first to recover, said: "To be quite frank, business men do not reveal such things. Fritz Hellebeck's debts? Why should Fritz Hellebeck have any debts?"

"He told me so himself," I replied in a faint voice. I felt certain that he had discharged his debt, and that they were convinced he had done so with the stolen money. But they argued that Fritz Hellebeck was more valuable to them than the youngster from the forge, and their one thought was to keep out of the distasteful business themselves and satisfy their feminine curiosity.

They expatiated on the topic of honest business for a while, deploring their tender consciences, and Dutti hugged me tighter than ever and rocked me to and fro. I wriggled out of his grasp, which nauseated me more and more, and, bidding them good-night, went out.

As I was deliberating desperately whither I should turn, the headmaster, who was in the habit of keeping an eye on his pupils after dark, suddenly appeared and recognized me. Old and bent, he used to prowl about on his crooked legs, with the eager searching eyes of a hungry dog. His noble face was marred by those eyes, which were full of malice. He looked at me as though I were a cannibal with a bloody knife between my teeth.

I believe he began by asking me whether the heavens had fallen in or whether the Danes were occupying Steenkarken.

I plucked up courage to answer, "No!"

He was silent, and the expression on his sullen face seemed to imply that, since these momentous and desirable events had not occurred, anything I might have to say was a matter of complete indifference to him.

I told him everything I knew, assuring him that I had not taken the money, and hoping that the person who had would return it to its place within the week. I don't know why I believed this possible, but I certainly did so.

His face grew gloomier and gloomier, and he looked away in disgust. Then, shaking with rage—he did this most convincingly—he implied that I was beyond the pale. He was evidently determined to wound me in the cruellest, most deadly way.

At that moment my uncle came up, and with an awkward bow entreated him not to speak to me.

The headmaster pretended not to see him, and, looking across the market-place, observed in icy tones: "Superfluous remark! The boy says that whoever has taken the money will put it back within a week. Ask him who that person is."

My uncle put the question and I shook my head.

"Rascal!" cried the old man.

"That's just what he is," agreed my uncle.

I repeated my strange hope.

With another awkward bow my uncle informed the headmaster that he refused to have me in the house any longer.

"Superfluous remark!" exclaimed the latter. "He must be told not only to clear out of house and school, but to get out of the town! And this very day!" So saying he pointed into the distance.

I crept away and ran to my room. Soon after I reached it I was joined by Paul Sooth, who, as usual, sat perched on the windowsill.

He asked me what was the matter, and thought of everything I could possibly have done. In any case, whatever it was, he said he was ready to help me, though he saw things very black indeed.

I thanked him feebly, but protested that nobody could help me now. This made him think of worse crimes. Had I assaulted the headmaster, or the dean, or the sheriff of the district? Anyhow, it did not matter—if I wished to fly, he would fly with me.

Meanwhile I had been making a bundle of my small belongings. I tried to comfort him, assuring him that I had done nothing of that kind. When I was ready to go I looked up at the only friend I had, and asked him whether he would come with me.

He turned a gloomy face towards me, and his eyes grew bright with fear. He said he had not given it sufficient thought; he must remember his brothers and sisters, whom he had to set free first. But he vowed that the moment the last of them had been provided for he would leave with a flourish of trumpets.

I told him I was at my wits' end to know where to go. It was out of the question to return to Engel Tiedje and the village, where I had always been looked upon as a prince. He gazed sadly at me. There was only one thing for me to do, he said; I must become a farmer's boy in the country. It was an appalling fate, and made him see things exceedingly black, but what else could I do? With luck I might escape the brutality of the peasants; but my only hope of redress would be to appeal in writing to the sheriff. Whereupon, taking his own letter of complaint from its place of concealment, he begged me to accept it, saying he could always draft another.

This was a genuine proof of devotion, for that letter was his most precious possession. Thanking him heartily I put it in my pocket.

I then picked up my bundle, climbed out of the window, and, shaking hands with him, went away.

I decided to go to my grandmother's, and tell her I had left Uncle Peter, and wanted to hide with her for a day. I wanted time to think out my plans.

As usual, I found a number of old neighbours smoking pipes round a table by the stove, but to my surprise I did not hear my grandmother's lively and occasionally spiteful tones, but only the monotonous voices of her visitors talking.

As I stood hesitating in the doorway, one of the old women said: "Yes, my dear boy, to-night will see the last of your poor old grandmother."

I gave a little cry, and dropped alarmed and exhausted on a chair near the door. Paying no further heed to me, they continued to discuss my grandmother's life.

I don't know whether my grandmother had really lost consciousness, but if she hadn't—and I don't think she had—she must have heard her own funeral oration. Her old neighbours passed the whole of her life in review, entering into the smallest details, decent and indecent, and thoroughly enjoying it. I don't think I have ever heard a more honest and honourable record. Meanwhile, in the dim light of the lamp, all I could see was my grandmother's profile, as she lay on her back in bed, and I marvelled at the purity of its outline.

Presently they made coffee, and gave me a cup, which I paid for, as my grandmother had no money; after which all of them left except one, who remained as a watcher. And she and I slept with our heads on the table all night. I was awakened by the sound of a squeaky voice, and looking up found Uncle Peter standing by the stove, facing the bed. The old neighbour was still asleep. Then I heard my grandmother speak. It sounded as if she were delirious. Addressing my uncle she asked him for money and accused him of cheating her at cards. A moment later she was singing.

At last the murmur of her voice seemed to bore him and he said: "It would be better if you talked about your own sins, or those of your grandchild here, who is a thief and has been expelled. But he was too much of a coward to go to the river where the sixth-form boys bathe."

I looked anxiously at the dying woman's face, and devoutly hoped that she could no longer understand her son's slanderous accusations. He was still standing by the stove, gazing quite unmoved at the bed. Suddenly her face began to twitch violently, and I stood up in alarm, and stepped back to the door, staring at the noble old features.

I could see that my uncle was laughing inwardly as he watched his dying mother's twitching face, and I was so terrified that I was tempted to spring at his throat. Possibly if I had done so the coward would have been so surprised that I should have got the better of him, although he was three times my size.

Dark clouds were sailing over the sky, and plunged the low-ceilinged room into darkness. It seemed as if my uncle, who had certainly never had the courage to look into his mother's honest, noble face when she was up and well, was unable to gloat sufficiently now that death was about to turn it to marble.

I don't remember what I thought at the time about these two people, who were my next of kin. All I know is that I seemed to see a halo about the dying woman, and perhaps it was my loathing of the crooked, stunted, wretched specimen of manhood by the bed, and my childish dread of death, which suddenly made me jump up with a cry, leave the room, pick up my bundle, and flee from the house.

. . . . .

I stopped running only when the last of the little tumble-down cottages was behind me, and I was on the high road, which at this point was flanked by sparsely grown fields and bushy heath.

I was a child with a lively imagination and had dark visions of spectres, robbers, giants, and witches. Moreover, I was miserable and utterly forlorn. I saw no prospect of receiving hospitality anywhere, and Sooth's tales about the brutality of the peasants were not calculated to inspire me with confidence. So it was not surprising that in my desire to escape the things above ground I was prepared to join the dead in their graves or the witches in their dens, and that I even took a certain gruesome pleasure in the supposed proximity of these uncanny creatures.

After a good hour's walk I reached the end of the heath and the dunes, and came to the marshes, which seemed to stretch to infinity towards the west and south. At what seemed to me a great distance away I saw a number of scattered farms, and made up my mind to seek employment on one of them. So I continued on my way, and must have walked for quite another hour. It was marshy, waterlogged country, and the farms stood in their own fields set well back from the highway. I wanted to call at each one I passed, but could not summon up the courage. Now that I was standing at the crossroads of destiny I felt incredibly faint-hearted. Moreover, I was exhausted, for I had come a long way, and I had not been to bed all night. It must have been about seven o'clock in the morning.

Sitting down on a stone by the wayside, I burst into tears, longing for the company of some kind man, Engel Tiedje above all. Oh, how I longed to be sitting on his lap, clasped in his great long arms! My sobs must have gradually subsided and ceased, for I fell into a deep sleep.

I was wakened by the sound of a trotting horse, a youth's curses, and the cawing of a jackdaw, and on looking up I saw Balle Bohnsack bending down over me. He was in his ragged leather jacket, sitting on his lean brown mare, with his jackdaw perched on the horse's black mane in front of him.

I started up, and asked him what he was doing there. But in his grandfatherly tones he replied that he surely had a better right to put that question to me.

Suddenly remembering what had happened, I lowered my eyes, and said nothing. I was ashamed of the suspicion under which I lay, and felt too agitated to speak.

He looked at his watch, said he would cut the first lesson at school, and asked me to tell him what was the matter.

I told him everything. He asked me how I knew that the money had always been there. Again I lowered my eyes. God knows, I was ashamed to tell him, for I felt that my answer must imply a suspicion, and I would have given the world to mention any other name than the one so sacred to me. But I had to tell him.

He gave a low whistle. I understood and blushed.

He noticed the colour in my cheeks, and immediately grasped its meaning.

I protested that I never said he had done it.

"I don't say so either," he replied thoughtfully.

I was overjoyed that he should believe me at once, as I felt he did, and I told him that in no circumstances could I return to Steenkarken, and as for home—my parents were dead.

"I know," he replied; "but there's that pantechnicon Johnny who lives at your house."

I said that I was too much ashamed, and, bursting into tears, told him that I was afraid everybody, even in my native village, would hear what had happened.

He pooh-poohed this, and again asked me what I proposed to do.

I told him I intended to seek employment on one of the farms in the neighbourhood. He whistled again, but agreed it was the best thing I could do, though I ought to let the old pantechnicon know as soon as I was settled.

I explained that I was going to tell him I was no good at book learning, and that the doctor had ordered me to give it up and try living in the country for two years.

He heartily approved. After a moment's thought, he suggested that if I wanted to be a farm boy I had better go to his farm, where he would be able to look after me, adding that although his parents were not much good Bothilde would help me.

The offer revived my spirits a little, and I looked up. He was still on his horse, and his jackdaw, which had flown to a tree, was awaiting his invisible signal to join him. He explained that Bothilde was his sister—"a great powerful wench," he said, "as fair as I am"—and pointing to a large farm in the fields he added: "Go and tell her she is to take you in, and ask no question till I return to-night."

. . . . .

What are my earliest memories of life at the Bohnsacks' farm? I can see myself at dawn, sitting on the edge of my litter, gazing at the straw on which I had slept, with my red check rug behind me. My eyes closed, I would sway from side to side. If I fell back on the straw again, the farm labourer who shared my quarters, and was already pulling on his jacket, would call out, "Up! Up, Otto!"

Then we would go into the fields and run through the mist for the horses. Fortunately I had been brought up with horses. At last I would catch two and lead them to the man, who, heaving me like a sack of corn on to one of them, would return to the farm with his batch. And as we trotted on—I anxiously holding on and terrified of falling under the huge hoofs below—I would gradually wake up and come to my senses. True, all my limbs felt stiff and bruised, and I would yawn all through the morning; but I would get through my long day's work somehow.

I can also see myself working in the fields, and constantly turning my head towards the farm and the road, so as not to miss Balle as he galloped off to school, with his jackdaw flitting from branch to branch at his side. I gazed sadly after him, for I had no opportunity now for learning and reading, and was banished from the books in which I imagined—somewhat erroneously—all my earthly joys and hopes were centred. I was certainly allowed to attend the village school once a week, though only for three hours; but the whole time I had an agonizing struggle with my heavy eyelids, which were constantly drooping, and my head, that insisted on falling forward on to the table. The master took no notice of me. But I tried to learn, though the teaching was so unintelligent and I felt so tired that I always fell asleep.

I can also see myself seated at the long table in the hall. At the head sat the farmer, big, dark, and taciturn, and by him his wife, who was just as tall, but thin and fair and always disagreeable. They were at loggerheads with each other and with the whole world. I kept out of their way, because I remembered what Paul Sooth had told me. Opposite me sat the two girls. Bothilde, the big, red-haired one, who was the daughter of the house, was always serious and said very little, but the little round one was always laughing. I thought them both exceedingly beautiful, and my affections wavered between one and the other. On Sundays Balle was at home and sat by me. But he was dumb in his parents' presence, as was also his jackdaw, perched behind him on the back of his chair.

But after dinner, when we went together through the wilderness of a garden to the hut where he kept his animals, he became himself again. Then with his pet fox on one arm, and the other ready to write, he would tell me the subject of his composition, and ask me to dictate it to him. This done, we walked across the fields and through the stables, and I listened to all his complaints about his parents, whom he hated. "They are regular ravens. As soon as their children grow up they throw them out of the nest. They have already turned out the two eldest, and they will drive me and Bothilde away too."

What else do I remember? I can see myself writing, with eyes blinded by tears, to Engel Tiedje, telling him that I was in the best of spirits, but that I had something the matter with my lungs, which fortunately the doctor had discovered in time. I believe I actually told him that the doctor was a friend of mine, and that he had sent me to live on a farm in the country. I said I had obtained work, and begged him not to come to me, adding that I would go to see him in the winter.

With beating heart I awaited his reply, which arrived a fortnight later. As usual, I felt qualms when I saw his handwriting. He pretended to be cool and collected, but in his heart of hearts he was a visionary and a prophet. Had not my father known it? And it came out in his letters, which also bore witness to the generosity of his great bashful heart.

He sent me his warmest greetings for my eleventh birthday, recapitulated the circumstances of my birth, and spoke of my good angel, Auntie Lena, reminding me how she had come on the day I was born with the dark woman, who had given me the old Dutch coin. He told me that every Sunday after feeding the pigs he always took the coin out of its hiding-place, examined it, and hoped that its brightness might lead me along the upward path. But the upward path was not to be found in the neighbourhood of a dung-heap! He apologized for mentioning this. Then, calling me his "son in the spirit," he said he was longing for me to pay him a visit, and looked forward to the talks we should have, on either side of the table, with the gold piece between us, while we gazed on its brightness, which was a symbol of the love that binds the world.

What else can I remember?

I cannot recollect much about the harvests, except that they were accompanied by much sunshine and wind. I have a more vivid recollection of the ploughing season. Most of our land was used for grazing, for we had a large number of cows, and there were two particularly rich meadows reserved for horses on the edge of the marshes. But we had a good deal of arable land as well. We used to plough this with teams of three to five horses, and I was always with the ploughman. We used to plough from dawn till late in the evening, and it was sometimes so cold in the morning that, try as I might, I could not get warm on the horse's back.

But in spite of the cold and my intense weariness, I enjoyed it. I was proud to think that small as I was I could help in the ploughing. And what I liked most of all was that I was obliged to sing at the plough. I believe I had to sing from morning to night, and if I was silent for any length of time I heard the ploughman's voice saying, "Well, don't you know any more?"

When we returned home at night how proud we felt! How we cracked our whips! And if no girl's face appeared, the ploughman would send me to the kitchen door, and I would call out in my clear, piping voice: "The ploughmen are here!" How proud I was then! I was a man! I was doing a man's work! The ploughmen were most important people. Their appearance at the farmstead meant a general festival.

I got on well with the girls. They were offhand but never unkind to me. I used to watch both them and all they did with the deepest interest, and remember that they struck me as being great powerful giantesses, especially when they were washing and I saw their naked arms and necks. Moreover, as far as I was concerned, they were the all-powerful custodians of such precious things as butter, apples, plums, and, at festival times, of raisins and currants. Once they left the tap of the beer-barrel on, so that all the beer ran away, and they were terrified of the scolding they would get from Frau Bohnsack. So they swore I had done it. I concluded that they must have some sort of right to tell such lies, and, hoping the woman would not bite my head off, I added my own lies to theirs, and explained how the accident had happened. She boxed my ears and scolded me, but I bore it all, and found that the girls rewarded me generously for my chivalry.

Was I unhappy at this time? I was certainly dead tired physically, for I never got enough sleep; but I was growing very fast. What distressed me most was the fact that the farmer and his wife were so disagreeable. But for that I was so comfortable and happy that for weeks at a time I was in danger of becoming completely adapted to my circumstances, and adopting the life for good.

But I always recalled my father's wise words and his intelligent face. I also saw my mother, Engel Tiedje, Almut, her friend Hans, and by his side proud Fritz Hellebeck, with his books under his arm. . . . And my mind would go back to books!

CHAPTER VI

I Gain a Friend

I THINK the ploughman must have fallen ill and died soon after Christmas, and I begged Bothilde to find somewhere else for me to sleep instead of the old straw-loft. Frau Bohnsack may also have wished me to change, so that I could sleep in the girls' room and put a stop to their pranks at night. At any rate, my bed was moved to the large room near the kitchen, where the two girls slept, and here the new ploughman, quite a decent fellow, would come of an evening to smoke. With him came a man called Dieter Blank, a little fellow with red hair, whose eyes radiated the fire and energy of youth. He was in love with Bothilde, and his chair was usually drawn close up to hers. Sometimes other young folk came, as many as ten or twelve at a time.

Dieter Blank, who hailed from the Schleswig moors, was, like most fiery people, a clever, agreeable fellow. He had more to say than anybody else, and I gathered that he used to play the violin at weddings and parties in the district, and that he drank a little too much as well.

I used to go to bed directly after supper and lie awake, so that I could watch the company. Each of them occupied a chair, and the men smoked, while the girls knitted, as they discussed the events of the day. Sometimes Dieter Blank would bring his fiddle, and play, as I thought, extremely beautifully.

How I came to be asked to tell them stories, I cannot remember. But in any case they used to invite me to do so every night, and, although at first I felt rather shy, when once I had got into a story the excitement would carry me away. As I sat up in bed, in the light of the fire, my one and only thought was to convey to my listeners as vividly as possible the pictures my imagination conjured up. But when the great room, which was never very well lighted, grew quite dark, I would suddenly have to stop, sometimes, to my surprise, before my story was finished. As a rule, it was Dieter Blank, who sat by Bothilde, who was the first to ask me to stop. And then I would do so at once and lie down. But I did not go to sleep, because I wanted to listen a little while longer. But, try how I might, I could no longer hear anything they said; for suddenly they all spoke in whispers, and I fondly imagined it was on my account. Nevertheless, I could not help feeling astonished when, through the darkness, I could just manage to see that whereas a moment previously all the chairs had been occupied, suddenly every other chair stood vacant, although no one had left the room. And the people on the occupied chairs also seemed to have grown larger. I remember that I had the strangest explanations for this extraordinary phenomenon. I also heard the girls giggle from time to time, and then suddenly grow angry. Whereupon a comforting murmur from a familiar male voice would reply. One morning, while they were milking in the stable and I was grooming the horses, I questioned the two girls about this mysterious proceeding.

Bothilde, who kept a straight face, replied with some hesitation that I could not have noticed the occupants of the empty chairs leave the room; but Dickje, the little fair girl, was immensely tickled. Resting her head against her cow's brown hide, she laughed until she cried.

I was not a very good-looking boy, but I had a nice slim figure, and pretty hair which lay attractively over my temples, while my dark blue deep-set eyes had a pure, pleading expression, which moved people's hearts. Moreover, I was eager to work and ready to please. Thus the two girls grew more and more fond of me. This was not surprising in Dickje, for she was a friendly creature; but even Bothilde grew attached to me. I felt rather shy in the presence of this great wench with her heavy movements. But I loved her all the same.

Shortly before the harvest a curious thing happened. One mild still evening, when she was sitting alone at our bedroom window and the whole farm was quiet—I presume all the others were attending some festival—she suddenly got up, heaved a deep sad sigh, and to my surprise asked me to go out with her. Feeling highly honoured I walked eagerly beside her. We sauntered slowly across the first horse-meadow without saying a word, and when I glanced surreptitiously up at her powerful face, with its dark eyes and broad brow, I saw in the pale moonlight that she seemed to be scanning the distance for something. Then we reached a path through a cornfield; the corn stood high and looked ghastly and white. She grasped my hand, and I was delighted. No woman had taken my hand in hers since my mother died.

As we went on and it grew darker, she said calmly, "As your legs must be wet through with the dew, it won't matter if they get a little wetter."

So saying she stepped with me into a ditch. I raised no objection, and we went on walking, while the water, which at first reached up to my knees, was soon up to my hips. But she said nothing, though she was breathing heavily, as if constantly suppressing a sigh; and, still scanning the distance, she grasped my hand as if I were a help and support. Although I felt the whole proceeding was very strange, I imagined there must be some dark meaning behind it, and that it was not wrong, and I strode obedient and unquestioning at her side. We went to the end of the ditch; then, clambering out, she looked anxiously round. What happened after that I have forgotten.

A few evenings later, when I was groping my way to the orchard to fill my pockets with apples, I heard her voice by the lilac-tree at the back of the house, and stopped to listen. God knows I was not moved by idle curiosity, or love of scandal; but ever since my earliest childhood I had always taken the keenest interest in everything human. She was talking to Dieter Blank the fiddler about a festival that was to take place shortly in a village some distance away.

"So you mean to go!" she was saying, in her calm tones. "But when you see some girl or other, she will bewitch you, and it will be the old story over again."

He assured her that he was not going.

But she was certain he would go.

"I see you don't love me," he said sadly, "and that's the whole trouble. If you were nice to me I would be steady and reasonable. I would let women and wine go to the devil and be faithful to you."

Whereupon her voice suddenly changed, and she said in stirring tones of weak surrender: "But you know I'm mad about you."

Even he was moved. "No, I didn't know," he replied softly.

"Then you know now," she said, in the same stirring voice, and with a stifled sob, and the gentlest appeals, she implored him not to go to the festival.

The humility in her voice frightened me so much—I regarded her as a mighty princess—that at this stage I must have run away.

I don't remember much about my journey to Stormfeld, but I know how I arrived. It was a dull, rainy day in October, and Engel Tiedje was standing in the middle of a heap of ploughs and harrows in front of the great door of the forge.

He started violently when he saw me, probably more on account of the expression in my eyes than because I had suddenly come upon the scene.

I know I looked at him in mortal terror, trying to discover whether he knew anything about the alleged theft. But as I soon saw he was gazing at me in the same old affectionate way, my face cleared, and I imagined he had believed my lie about my health, and knew nothing about the theft.

It was only later that I learnt I was mistaken and that he had heard everything, even before my letter reached him. He had actually gone to Steenkarken and seen both my uncle and the headmaster, but he never for one moment believed in my guilt. He had also visited the Bohnsacks' farm, and spied round, but on finding that I was decently treated, he had been content to leave me there. I believe he must have obtained some of his information about me from Balle Bohnsack, for the two always spoke of each other with the greatest interest.

How delighted he was to see me! "God's truth!" he exclaimed tenderly. "My little boy! Miracle of God! My little Otto!" Then he led me into the forge, and we sat down in our usual places, and were soon engaged in the liveliest conversation. He thought I had grown, and expressed his delight that the danger was over, saying it was the stable air that had done the trick. He acted his part well!

On the following morning he took me all over the house and through the little garden. He evidently wanted to set my mind at rest by showing me that everything was in the same apple-pie order in which my mother had left it. Apparently he now had a horse and a cow, and tilled the little piece of ground we owned himself. As a further proof that everything was in order and well looked after, he took me to the forge and showed me the account-book and the records of his stewardship. I glanced down the pages pretending to understand, and said that it seemed all right. But I believe I wondered even then how it was that, although he always had plenty to do and worked hard, he was always short of money. I am convinced that the six marks he gave me on the following morning when I left was the only money he had. In fact I believe they were borrowed from the mason's widow, who did his washing, because I saw him run over to her rather awkwardly before breakfast.

I had to be back at the farm by midday on the third day of my leave, and it was only at breakfast that morning that I screwed up courage to tell him that I should like to go back to the grammar school. My Uncle Peter was too wicked for me to return to him; and there were others in Steenkarken whom I hinted I never wished to see again.

He was evidently acutely conscious of his inability to help me in the difficulties of life. We were silent for some time, while he rocked me gently in his arms. Forlorn little waif that I was this gave me an indescribable feeling of being loved, as though I were being rocked on my mother's lap again. At last he said hesitatingly: "I have thought over it a good deal, Otto; there are two things we can do. We might manage it ourselves, but we should have to raise a fresh mortgage."

I had heard this word before in the twilight of Dutti Kohl's shop, and had gathered it was a troublesome business. I tried to explain this.

He was at a loss for a reply, for he must have known that our little property was already heavily mortgaged, and had been ever since my father's illness. At last he suggested that he might approach the dean, my godfather, on my behalf.

I told him that he would certainly not succeed where my father had failed. He agreed, and, taking his keys from his pocket, unlocked a drawer in the desk and laid something wrapped in paper on the table. I knew it was the gold coin, and as we sat gazing at it he told me that he had been to Ballum to spy out the land. Frau Mumm, the lady with the gold necklace, had returned to her house on the market-place with her son and daughter. The son was a hefty lad of about sixteen, and would make a good blacksmith's apprentice, while the girl, who was about my own age, was thin and gawky. With drops of sweat standing out on his brow, he added nervously that "she" was there too, and when I inquired whether he meant the warming-pan woman he nodded anxiously and said she was Frau Mumm's servant.

What a calamity! Why should that fiery creature be in that house of all places! We were at our wits' end. At last he comforted me by saying that if I avoided the subject of fire and kept away from her when she was near it, I would get on with her all right.

When I asked whether he had spoken to Frau Mumm, he replied that "the person"—his former wife—had come to the door just as he was looking at the house. Evidently that had been enough! And he had fled.

He said that Frau Mumm was immensely wealthy, but as hard as nails.

I asked him about Auntie Lena.

"I have seen her!" he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "Her name is Lena Bornholt, and she has grown a bit fatter since we last saw her. I saw her walking with a gentleman, who turned out to be her husband, Dr Bornholt, professor at the grammar school at Ballum."

"Did she recognize you?" I exclaimed eagerly.

"My dear Otto," he rejoined, "would it have been a good thing if she had? She can't have a very pleasant recollection of me! How did I behave when she came here? Rottenly, Otto, my boy, rottenly! Yes, you can say so to my face. I behaved rottenly!"

As he had said it himself I was bound to agree. "And I know now, Otto," he added—"I mean since I have seen her again, that we have two strings to our bow—the mortgage and Auntie Lena."

It was nearly time for me to go. He went with me as far as the hill from which the brickworks could be seen. Then he handed me a small linen bag about the size of my hand, with a stout string to it, and told me that it contained the gold coin. I was to wear it round my neck, under my shirt, and I could see that he was struggling with tears as he fastened it on. He seemed to feel that he could do nothing more for me. It was his last hope. And for all his fond imaginings he must have felt it was a forlorn one.

We said good-bye at the old deserted saw-mill, and he went back to work.

. . . . .

In addition to his other activities, Farmer Bohnsack carried on a fairly lucrative trade in horses, and in the autumn, directly after the harvest, I was again obliged to scour the countryside. As a rule I set out long before dawn with the new farm-hand, who rode ahead of me with another string of horses; but as often as not I had to go alone.

I remember many such rides, as I followed behind with my string of horses. As there was no light I could hardly see the moving mass a hundred yards in front, and when trees or buildings intervened I would peer eagerly through the darkness, listening for the clink of a chain or the sound of a horse's hoof ahead; whereupon I would put my team to the trot, until I could see the moving mass ahead of me again and feel reassured. And thus we rode, through sleeping hamlets, along lonely field-paths, over moorland and through woods.

Balle told me that the man was always half-asleep on these rides. But I was never more awake. I would see the young swain standing in the shadow of a wall beneath his sweetheart's window, the fox creeping away from the farmsteads, and the roe standing ghostlike in the twilight of the woods. I heard the note of the first birds, and as it grew light I saw the life in the cottages, and imagined the secret tears and laughter which the walls concealed. Then I began to feel happier; my anxiety grew less, my distress turned to calm wistfulness, and hope would gradually cheer my heart.

But all too often sadness and despondency outweighed my good cheer. It was not that I was tired and felt the strain on my legs, which were too short to grip the broad backs of the horses, or that my arms ached from the constant pull of the halters. It was the fact that Farmer Bohnsack often sent me on these journeys alone that made my imagination play havoc with my nerves.

Slow, cautious, and suspicious in other ways, Farmer Bohnsack was singularly careless with regard to these excursions of mine. He sometimes sent me on a three-hour ride all alone through the night with a string of valuable young animals, regardless of the difficulties I might encounter. More than once I had over a thousand marks in the breast-pocket of my jacket, and after my unhappy experiences I was terrified when I had this money on me.

Once or twice—as I see now—I was in very real danger. One morning, for instance, feeling utterly exhausted, I left the farm at dawn with three horses. As I entered the high road to Friederichhof, which crossed the moor and was quite deserted, I saw two men standing at the foot of a fir-tree. They looked as if they had been waiting for me, and as I came up they approached me and began talking, telling me to dismount and have a chat. But I grasped my reins all the tighter. Then they asked me whether I could sell them a horse, and smacking one of the beasts on the thigh made it start. The blood rushed madly through my veins, but I pretended to think they were joking, and chaffed them for a while to try to gain time. But I felt as though I had been there for years, when suddenly a man leading a horse and cart loomed through the mist, and I was saved.

On another occasion I had just been paid four thousand marks by some horse-dealers. As I was leaving the inn where I had received the money I heard the landlady exclaim what a fool my master must be. "It will get to be known that that child rides about with all that money," she said, "and then there will be trouble."

Balle envied me these rides across country, and every evening he would take me to his hut near the orchard, where he kept his menagerie, and ask me how I had got on. One Sunday when his parents had gone to Steenkarken, as they frequently did, we were standing at this spot, when he again complained bitterly of not having been able to go on any of these excursions with me.

I asked him why he did not wish to be a farmer.

He was holding a young hare in his arms, while his jackdaw was cawing noisily on the roof of the hut. He shook his head. "If my father thought for one moment that I wanted to be a farmer," he replied, "and was casting covetous eyes on the farm, he would kick me out at once. He is a devil. He is treating his children just as he treated his brothers and sisters.

He was the eldest, and he chucked them all out. As for mother—well, she's right off her chump."

When I inquired what he meant he replied, "Absolutely daft." Then he asked whether I could guess how she kept her face so white and soft. I had noticed it was peculiar, but had no idea what she did to it.

"Face cream!" he cried. "And who pays for it? Oh, well, let's chuck it! But I'm thinking that one of these fine days my sister will put an end to their monkey-tricks!"

But his sister was so quiet and amenable, I protested.

"Yes," he agreed, "outwardly. But inwardly she is the biggest firebrand going. If she ever sees through them God help them!"

He again discussed his idea of being a clergyman and the three years' supply of sermons, and said that the only thing he was afraid of was that his girl would not put up with the animals.

"What girl?" I exclaimed.

"Why, the ferryman's daughter," he replied. "You know the ferry to Ballum."

I did not tell him that I knew both Ballum and the ferry, and he begged me, if ever his father sent me in that direction, to be sure to greet Dina Busch, "from her young man."

A few weeks later, on one of my horse-dealing expeditions, I chanced to find myself about an hour's ride from the ferry, and decided to take a roundabout way home, and pay a visit to ferryman Busch and his daughter. On reaching the spot, from which in the distance I could see the town of Ballum which my father had once pointed out to me so hopefully, I dismounted, and tethering my horse to a post sauntered past the ferryman's cottage. The two eldest children, whom I remembered having seen five years previously, were sitting in front of the cottage. They were a fresh, good-looking couple, and regardless of the cold afternoon wind were sitting there very simply and tidily dressed. The girl was knitting diligently. As she bent forward, I could see how carefully her hair was combed on either side of the parting, and her round face glowed with health and cleanliness. But cleanest of all were her eyes, which seemed to look out upon the world as if it were slightly soiled. Her brother's head was bowed over a slate, on which I could see row upon row of figures arranged with meticulous regularity.

Evidently they were used to boys coming along with horses, for they hardly looked up. Although I was very shy, I screwed up courage to speak to her, and asked her whether her name was Dina.

She nodded curtly.

I said that I had come to bring her greetings from her young man.

Letting her knitting drop into her lap, she looked up. "Gracious goodness!" she exclaimed, "what an idiot! He's mad!"

Her brother appeared to be accustomed to these messages for his sister; in any case they did not interrupt his calculations.

I asked her what Balle had done.

"What has he done?" she retorted, as if she were surprised that I had not heard the tale of his misdeeds shouted from the housetops. "What has he done?" she repeated, as if it were quite sufficient for him to be merely himself. "There he stands, where you are now, his hair all dishevelled, his boots and breeches covered with mud, and his dreadful cap on his head, and tells me I am to be his wife!"

She evidently thought him quite mad, and, shaking her neat little head as if she had just seen a toad, declared that if she lived to be a hundred she would never have a civil word for him, and did not care "that" for him—"that" being the tiniest little bit of her little finger. So saying, she looked at me with such scorn and contempt that, somewhat perfidiously, I decided to stifle any respect I might still have felt for Balle, and in future to be more stand-offish with him. Meanwhile I assured her that I had only a passing acquaintance with the monster—which she said was something to be thankful for, as it would be a terrible calamity to be obliged to have anything to do with him.

As I was now completely won over, I warned her that he was a pig-headed devil, and that having made up his mind to marry her things looked serious.

She glanced up at me, and I could see that she doubted my sanity. At this point her father appeared. As it had rained heavily all night, he had put on his oilskins, and looked more like a walking mountain than a man.

He was very friendly, asked me about my parents, and was most sympathetic when I told him that they were dead.

I said I had recognized his eldest child immediately.

"Helmut!" he exclaimed, his eyes brightening. "He is going into the Guards. At present he is keeping the books for the dairy, and earns fourpence a day!" And he gazed proudly at his first-born.

When I asked about Dina he replied that she had nine people's stockings to darn, as her mother had no time, and laughed proudly. Then his wife appeared. She was a stout little woman, with a huge white apron, and was carrying a pail of milk. Sitting down by her children on the bank, she asked me where I lived.

I was somewhat ashamed to confess that I lived with the Bohnsacks.

She nudged Dina. "Your young man's people!" she exclaimed. The ferryman roared with laughter.

"He and Dina?" he said. "Why, Dina would sooner take a sweep!"

"It's funny," observed her mother, "but there's something in your eyes. You don't look a bit like a stable-boy."

"She knows a thing or two," said the ferryman, and proceeded to tell us about a certain waiter in the second company of his regiment who looked extremely aristocratic, and eventually proved to be of noble birth.

Frau Busch gave me a glass of milk to drink, and I mounted my horse and rode away.

During the autumn I was sometimes quite alone with Bothilde. Dickje shared another room with the little maid, and the winter gatherings in my room had not yet started. Bothilde used to send me to bed early, but I could not, or would not, go to sleep, and used to talk to her as she sat sewing at the window. After a while Dieter Blank, the little fiddler, would come, and Bothilde would get up and sit whispering with him by the stove. I kept as still as a mouse, listening eagerly for any light their conversation might shed on human life. Though they might begin with ordinary topics she always ended by imploring him to give up wine and women, and not attend any more festivals. "You are a farmer's son," she would say, "and should be above such things."

She was a big, well-built girl, quiet and matter-of-fact, like many others in the neighbourhood. They were like lonely walled-in gardens; one could see only the topmost blooms and guess at the other fragrant flowers that filled them. I heard her imploring him in earnest, moving accents, full of kindness and love, to listen, and was genuinely delighted when he promised he would not go to some festival or other. But I felt certain he would do what she wanted. How could anybody resist such beauty and gentleness!

Occasionally, in the middle of some such scene, he would beg for a proof of her love. "Give me a proof!" he cried. "If you proved you loved me, I would stay at home!" I did not quite see what further proof she could give; for she called him the most endearing names, and must certainly have fondled him. His continued pleading seemed to me incomprehensible and distressing. Then she would call out softly to me, "Are you asleep?"

More often than not I must have been asleep when she put that question. But if I was still awake it never occurred to me that she might have preferred me to be asleep—on the contrary, I thought she was glad I was still awake. For she would come up to my bed and say: "Otto, there's a noise in the stable. It sounds as if the calves had got loose. Will you go and see? But go quietly." Or: "Otto, it's raining hard, and I think I can hear an open window rattling in the attics. Will you go and see? But go very quietly." Or else she thought she had left the stable door open.

I was only too ready to do anything for her! But how terrified I was, going to the top of the house in the dark! What visions I saw! Not to mention the howling of the wind and the scuttling of the rats and mice.

On one occasion the stable door really was open when I reached it, and as I caught hold of the latch to close it I heard a low cry and Dickje's voice saying: "Heavens, what's that? . . . Who's there? . . . Is it you?"

I whispered that Bothilde had sent me to see to the door. When she had recovered from her surprise she called gently into the darkness, "Be off!" and as a man crept away she knelt down before me, to make sure it was I, and laughed herself silly.

I asked in astonishment why she was laughing, and explained that as Dieter Blank was with Bothilde she could not come herself.

This made her laugh more than ever, and when I said I must be getting back because Bothilde would be anxious, she held her sides and groaned as if she would really die of laughter, but told me to stop a bit longer.

I asked her who the man was I had seen slip away.

"Oh," she cried, "he only came to help me shut the door."

One evening when Bothilde and I were alone, and I was already in bed, the fiddler came as usual, and as I was curious to hear what they talked about I pretended to be asleep. They kissed each other, and she begged him not to go to the great fair that was being held the next day in a neighbouring town and was to last two days. "You'll only be tempted by some girl or other," she said, "and when you've had enough of love you'll drink." And he promised her.

A moment later she told him that as she had discovered she could not rely on his word, she had made up her mind to let him stay at the farm during the two days of the fair, so as to keep him out of harm's way.

He protested; but she took no notice, and, reminding him that these two days were the most dangerous in the whole year for him, she said: "Don't oppose me! It will be no good! I'll put you in the apple-loft, and keep the key in my pocket. I'll come and see you during the day, and be very nice to you."

He agreed, because she did it out of love, he said.

As a matter of fact, he remained three days and three nights in the apple-loft, and I was able to watch her. She was like a dove with her first nest of eggs. She had no thought for anything else. She took him his food secretly; she made signs to him from the garden under cover of the young plum trees; she stole into the garden with him at nightfall, and during the day tried, not altogether successfully, to joke with us in her usual way!

On the evening of the third day she came up to my bed and begged me to see to the calves, as she was afraid she had not fastened the door properly. But as I was going through the scullery I suddenly saw a tall figure, with a snow-white shining face, and wearing baggy grey sailors' trousers, stretching out long bony arms to seize me.

I gave a shriek of horror. As I was always on tenterhooks and expecting to see some terrifying vision, I fled shuddering to the wall. The apparition also shrank back terrified, but quickly recovering itself, seized me violently by the arm crying, "You little devil," and led me back into the room.

Bothilde was there alone, at the window, which she had just opened; and at the same moment, roused by my shrieks, Balle and his father rushed in.

The starlight flooding the room and the sound of her voice soon revealed the fact that the apparition was Frau Bohnsack. Her gaunt yellow face was smeared all over with thick cream, which she put on to prevent wrinkles.

Then, for some reason or other, probably because he had made a grimace when he saw her—his features were not always under control—Frau Bohnsack turned on Balle, and in a sudden access of rage shrieked: "Go! Clear out! Pack up your things! Get out!"

Pale to the lips, and addressing his father, he stammered: "I need hardly ask what you have to say! But I should like to know what you think?" he added, turning his small fair head to his sister.

"You will stay here!" Bothilde replied calmly. "You will remain here!"

"Get out!" his mother shrieked again. "Get out!"

Bothilde shook her head, and her beautiful eyes flashed fire. "If you drive us out of the house," she said coldly, "I shall go and stand at the cross-roads where the children pass on their way to school and tell them that when you were young you cheated your orphan brothers and sisters out of their land and money. I have taken the letters about it from father's desk. I shall also tell them how you water the milk every morning, and how you smear your wrinkled old face with the cream you steal from the dairy. I am twenty, and shall do as I choose. From this day on, father will be the first farm-hand, and you, Balle, will be the second. And the horse-dealing business, the Sunday excursions, your smooth face, and the grammar school—those are things of the past. I shall write to my eldest brother to tell him to come back—the second is no good. It's not very nice to have to talk to my parents like this, but it's the only thing to do."

Standing between the bed and the wall, I watched this scene horror-struck—the tall, beautiful girl, usually so calm, her eyes flaming as she lashed her parents with words too hard for lips that still burned with lover's kisses; the wretched, scraggy old woman, wiping the cream from her face with the corner of her jacket, and cowering beneath her daughter's scorn like a skeleton about to collapse; and the great hulking man, who could boast loudly enough in the market-place, but was now standing pale and biting his lips like a nincompoop, by the side of the wretched wife, who had always trampled him under foot in his own house.

The room must soon have cleared; for in a little while I had spread one of my large red handkerchiefs on the table, and was making a bundle of my belongings—my Sunday suit, my boots, and my washing materials. Then, sobbing violently, I snatched up my bundle, slipped through the large hall, and ran as fast as my legs would carry me. I am afraid I was a bit of a coward. I could not bear the unmasking of these souls, and felt I must leave a house where a daughter had thus humiliated her parents.

On my way out I caught sight of Balle standing by his hut in the moonlight. He had his fox cub in his arms, and was holding two young rabbits between his ankles. He was surprised to see me, and asked what I wanted.

I told him I could not stay any longer, and was going home to Engel Tiedje.

Laying a hand on my shoulder, he looked paternally down at me. "You're quite right to go," he said. "But see that the old pantechnicon arranges to get you back to your books."

Sobbing more loudly than ever, I said I doubted whether he could manage that.

As for himself, continued Balle, he saw now that he could never be a clergyman. Perhaps it was all for the best, as he doubted whether the triennial repetition of sermons would have been a success. Then he offered me his fox.

I shook my head, saying I should not know what to do with it. Whereupon, taking hold of its collar, he dropped it to the ground, and the animal scampered away across the orchard.

This brought me to my senses. I had always dreaded the moment when I should have to take leave of my last great friend; but I gave him my hand, thanked him for his kindness, and left.

On reaching the high road, with my bundle under my arm, I turned round to have a last look at the farm. I felt that in that house and on those fields which I had learned to plough I had picked up something useful that would stand me in good stead in life; but I was also convinced that it was high time to leave it.

Then, putting my hand to my breast, I felt for the gold coin Engel Tiedje had given me, and went on my way.

CHAPTER VII

Auntie Lena and her House

It was the end of October, and the weather was bright and windy. The fields were covered with stubble, and there were no cows in the meadows. The tall trees that served as wind-screens to the farms were already looking bare, and I could see the rooks' nests quite plainly. Far away across the moor the first streak of dawn appeared.

As I feared, though quite unnecessarily, that some one from the farm might come after me I asked a farmer who was driving his cart along the road to give me a lift. He was known to be a surly customer, and I did not find it easy to ask him. However, he nodded, and I clambered up into the cart beside him.

At first he did not speak or pay any attention to me, but seemed wholly engrossed in counting on his fingers. But when we did begin to talk we quarrelled, and it ended by his dropping me, without further ado, back on the road, and flinging my bundle after me. In the course of our conversation he asked me whether I had heard that he was a tough customer. And when I admitted that I had, he promptly told me to get out, and was soon buried in his calculations again.

Picking my bundle up out of the dust, I trudged on, passing through two villages in the course of the morning. My object was to reach Ballum, where I hoped my luck would turn.

But as I trudged along hour after hour, growing more and more tired at every step, I began to lose heart and to be filled with fear. My hopes struck me as fantastic and senseless, and my undertaking as absurd; and taking refuge from the west wind behind a wall, I fell a prey to the deepest despair.

I must have remained there some hours. My hope and courage had vanished, and prompted by fear and homesickness I changed my bearings and turned towards Stormfeld. . . .

But 'turned' is not quite the right word; I felt drawn—no impelled—to that direction.

I took no notice of anything on the road—my one thought was the old saw-mill, which I could see far away on the horizon; and I made towards it, reaching it worn out and miserable just as it was growing dark.

All this time I had been obsessed by an ardent longing to get home, to be near the grave of my parents, and to see the face of my best friend. But as I stood beneath the creaking wings of the mill and looked down on my native village I felt I could not return without having accomplished something; and, sobbing aloud, I sat down on one of the huge beams at the foot of the building.

Suddenly I was overcome with unutterable weariness, the weariness of the labourer, which I had first experienced at the farm. Staggering up the decayed wooden steps, I groped about for a convenient flat surface, knelt down, and with my bundle as a pillow quickly fell asleep. At dawn I awoke, and with one last look at my native village I turned north again.

I should have reached my destination much more quickly if I had cut across country, and should not have needed to ask the way; for the towers of Ballum would soon have been visible in the distance. But I was only a silly child; moreover, I rather dreaded reaching my goal, and wanted to put it off as long as possible. So I walked for hours, taking the roundabout route along the coast, until at midday, tired and hungry —I had not had a morsel to eat—I reached a great harbour lock.

There I saw a fairly large boat full of sacks of flour, moored to the quay. The boatman was busy hoisting the sails. In the back of the boat sat a fat, fair man, evidently a baker and the owner of the cargo, while among the sacks of flour squatted four fat little boys, who seemed to be his children, eating their breakfast.

Addressing him with some hesitation, I said I wanted to go to Ballum.

"Then you can sail with us, if you like," he replied. "If we move up a bit, there'll be room for you."

We sailed up-stream with the wind behind us. All I remember about the journey was the wind, the flapping of the sails, the round white mounds of the flour-bags, the children, and the boatman at the tiller, taking the stumpy pipe from his stubbly moustache from time to time and putting his lips to the neck of a bottle, from which he took long, hearty draughts. The baker's chief hobby seemed to be collecting animals with odd limbs and members. He showed me a chicken with four toes on each foot, of which he seemed very proud. But I was much more interested in his children, who all looked very well and had intelligent eyes. I asked him their names; he did not seem to have heard my questions, but informed me that he had once had a deer with three horns.

When I told him about myself and my strange quest in Ballum, he grew highly excited, and informed his children that I was a phenomenon quite as strange, if not stranger, than his four-toed chicken and his three-horned deer.

We had sailed a considerable distance up-stream with the tide, when the boatman, who had been drinking heavily and cursing the mist, the wind, and the stream, suddenly announced that he could not proceed any farther that day, but was going home to bed. And, turning a deaf ear to the baker's indignant protests, he steered for the quay and hove to.

The baker went with his children to a farm close by to spend the night, or try to hire a conveyance, leaving me alone with the drunkard; and, as it had grown dark, I could think of nothing better than to follow this man to his home.

He entered a tumbledown little cottage, and I stood desolate and forlorn on the mud floor of the front room, while he went to the back. Soon a woebegone woman appeared, who in hardly audible accents told me to come in. The drunkard sat down by the bed at the far side of the table, with his bottle before him, and smoked, ate, and drank, while his wife and children, all poorly clad, sat with their backs to the wall anxiously watching him. At last, when he had finished his meal, he stood up, staggered into the corner, flung himself on the bed, and immediately broke into loud snores.

As soon as he was asleep the little group who were sitting dejectedly against the wall seemed to wake up. The mother and children began to tidy the room and lay the table; and, taking their places, began to eat, inviting me to join them. At bedtime some of them retired to a little room adjoining, while the rest went to the front room. I was given the eldest son's shake-down. The last sound I heard was the mother praying in Low German for her children.

The following morning I decided to continue my way on foot. I think I dreaded reaching my relations too soon. So I walked very slowly along the river bank, and at midday reached the ferry. Loitering on the dyke, where six years ago I had stood by my father's side, and only six months ago had come alone on horseback, I gazed at the river, the town beyond, and the ferry as it plied to and fro, and I spent the whole afternoon in this way, with my red bundle at my side, till at last evening fell.

Looking round, I saw a little pedlar coming along, and thinking that I should like to hear the sound of a human voice again, and that he might have some food to share with me, I followed him.

When he heard that I wanted to go to Ballum he told me I might still be able to cross, but in case there were no lodgings to be had, he advised me to go to a farm close by and ask for some straw and a blanket.

As we drew near I saw that the farmhouse was a fairly large rambling building, all the windows and doors of which were crooked, while the front door in particular hung all lop-sided on its hinges.

"The most hard-working couple in all Schleswig live there," said the pedlar, and as he saw from my expression that I did not know whether his words were meant as a recommendation or not—for I had made up my mind to sleep on this side of the river, and, with courage refreshed, to go to Ballum the next day—he added: "They are two brothers, sheep-farmers. They are nice people and will give you a kindly welcome. But be careful: they are so energetic and will leave you so little peace that you'd better keep out of their way if you don't want them to knock you down in their hurry."

I nodded my thanks, and made for the farm. Entering by the front door, which was open, I advanced cautiously across the hall, as I was afraid the inmates might dash past me and knock me down. Picking my way through a number of sheep that were standing and lying about, I went towards a fire burning at the other end of the hall.

There, beside a chopping-block on the right of a crackling fire of brushwood, sat two big bearded men, in grey shirts and breeches, eating bread and cold bacon in the most leisurely fashion, and drinking tea out of enormous mugs. They turned their huge dishevelled heads, looked at me, turned back to the chopping-block, and once more reached out, with incredibly slow and sluggish movements, to the bacon.

I begged for a piece of bread and some straw for the night. They did not stir, but both pointed with a faint jerk of their knives to a place on the hearth which was still unoccupied.

I understood; dropped my bundle, sat on the hearth, and partook of the bread and bacon that lay on the chopping-block. I remember to this day how much I enjoyed it, and how thankful I was to be under a roof, and to see that the two men looked extremely good-natured. At a sign from them I fetched myself a cup, and, after filling it up, replenished theirs as well. I was inclined to be awkward with inanimate objects; but with human beings I was always at my ease at once.

At last one of them got up incredibly slowly and sauntered lazily out through the sheep. When he had gone his brother pointed at him with his knife and said in calm, sleepy, and somewhat contemptuous tones: "Do you imagine he'll shut the front door when he comes back? It is the only thing he has to do the livelong day! But he won't! Night after night the door stops open. He's a nice fellow, I can tell you! . . . Too lazy!"

I agreed that it was a bad business, and asked him why he did not shut the door himself. He mumbled something—possibly that as his brother was the younger it was his duty to shut the door. Then he rubbed his knife clean on the hearthstone and followed the other man out.

After a while one of them came back—I was not sure which it was; but I assumed it was the one who had gone out first. After lighting his pipe, he made much the same remarks about the door as his brother had done.

Again I asked why he did not shut it himself.

He mumbled something in his beard. I believe he said that as his brother was the elder it was his duty to shut the door; but when I offered to do it he shook his head and said it was too heavy.

The other brother now returned and began to smoke. And there they sat, looking lazily round, first at the flies on the wall, then at the sheep, and anon at their pipes, which must have been in a pretty filthy condition, as they constantly failed to draw.

After a while one of them observed—I could not tell which it was—that the front door must be shut.

The other agreed, but neither stirred. Whereupon, with infinite calmness and deliberation, they began to argue in short sentences as to whose fault it was that the door had not been shut for the last ten years. They took each other to task, but without either excitement or spite—on the contrary, they were perfectly calm and serene, mumbling into their beards.

In the middle of the argument there suddenly appeared in the doorway a woman of medium height with the most graceful carriage and figure, who with bare feet and the springiest steps I have ever seen picked her way towards us through the sheep. As she approached I thought her face was also marvellously beautiful, not to say majestic. But as soon as she was close up I saw that it was really brutally ugly, morbidly red, almost coppery, and that her eyes beneath her black hair looked dull and bestial. Nevertheless her fine powerful figure and well-shaped red mouth made her not altogether unpleasant to behold. I was quick to recognize that there was something extraordinary both about her form and her personality, and began to devour her with my eyes.

Taking a place on the hearth, she asked me all sorts of questions about myself, and, scrutinizing me with her dark little eyes lying deep in their sockets, she addressed me by the name she was afterwards to use again and again.

"Where do you come from, little Twiddlums?" she inquired.

I take it that this strange word meant "darling" to her dull mind, and that the trustful look in my eyes had suggested it; for my face was unusually childlike.

I had meant to be cautious in my replies, but as she was so human and natural, and continued to question me, I told her I came from Stormfeld.

Her wild face suddenly became violently convulsed and confused, and assumed an expression with which I was destined to become familiar. Then, gently shaking her head, and looking perplexed, she asked me whether the blacksmith's forge was still there.

When I told her it was, but that the smith and his wife were dead, she started. "Oh, young Babendiek and his clever wife!" she exclaimed. "Nice people! Nice people!"

She did not see my eyes fill with tears, and I refrained from revealing my identity, partly out of shyness and partly because I wondered what I should hear if I kept my name secret.

Looking at me with sudden eagerness, she asked whether the short, thick-set assistant were still there. I replied that he was, and that he was running the forge by himself now.

She said no more, but stood up and began putting things away and tidying up.

The two shepherds had remained quite unmoved by her presence, apparently regarding her with the same indifference as they did the flies and the sheep.

When she had rampaged about the place for about an hour, working with extraordinary zeal and efficiency, she sat down on the opposite side of the hearth, seized the poker, and turned and twisted it about in the fire, while the little flames licked and played round it. I have never seen the idea of "playing with fire" better illustrated. Then brandishing the red-hot poker before the two besotted giants, and beating time with it, she sang an absurd Low German love-song, her little eyes sparkling in the light of the fire.

It must have been then that it flashed through my mind that she might be my old friend's former wife, now employed by Frau Mumm of the gold necklace; but perhaps the idea only flitted vaguely through my mind, when I remembered the wild scenes at the forge, so often described to me by Engel Tiedje. At all events, I was soon overcome by fatigue, and slept all night on the straw, close to the sheep, covered with a blanket the woman had drawn over me. "Sleep well, Twiddlums!" she had said as she paid me this last kind attention.

I was a child and I did sleep well.

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On the following morning the shepherds left me to light the fire, make the coffee, and see to the sheep and a few things about the house, while they seated themselves comfortably by the hearth, smoking and arguing in a desultory fashion as to which of them was the lazier.

Immediately after the midday meal I washed and got ready for my difficult undertaking. As there were no brushes for either clothes or boots in the house, I smoothed out my suit with my fingers moistened in water, and washed my boots under the pump. Then, taking the comb from my bundle and combing my hair, which reached almost down to the collar of my jacket, I was ready to set out upon my hazardous venture.

I hurried past the ferry-house, so as to avoid being seen by Dina, whose tidiness and frankness had made a deep impression on me. Otherwise I felt far braver than I had done the day before. I was convinced, however, that the red-headed giant of a ferryman would recognize me, and I was not mistaken.

I noticed how pityingly he looked at me, knowing I was an orphan, though he tried not to show it too much. But his eyes lighted up when he told me about his wife and children. He proudly informed me that Helmut was now studying physics, and that Dina was the cleanest and tidiest girl for miles around, adding that Balle Bohnsack was a filthy lout.

In reply to a question I put to him he said he knew Frau Mumm very well. She was the richest and haughtiest woman in the town, and lived in a very old house on the market-place. She had two children—a boy of about sixteen, who looked like a peasant and wanted to be an artist, and a daughter at school in Hamburg. But although they were very distinguished, Frau Mumm was not the leading lady of Ballum; the leading lady was Auntie Lena—Lena Bornholt, wife of Professor Bornholt, but known to everybody as Auntie Lena.

How she came to be so, he could not say; but he imagined it was because she had a large heart and a great gift of the gab. "She twists every one round her little finger."

I felt exceedingly proud and elated, and would gladly have continued the conversation, but the ferry had reached its destination. Wishing him good-bye, I ascended the crooked street leading to the town, and reached the market-place. I recognized Frau Mumm's house with its dark brown front door, its brightly polished windows, and its shining brass handle. I must have stood gazing at it for fully an hour, remembering how disconsolately my dear father had once stood at that very door! At last I crept stealthily to the side entrance, where I could hear the clatter of clogs and the sound of some one at work, and, peering cautiously through the crack of the door, which was ajar, lo and behold! there was my friend of the previous evening!

With her neck and arms bare she was standing over a tub; behind her in the scullery a bright fire was burning, the glow of which was reflected on her figure. She was working hard, and breathing heavily, and from time to time an impatient expletive escaped her full lips.

As I was watching her, half hoping she would look up and give me an opportunity of addressing her, a powerful youth of about sixteen, with a broad, vigorous face, and exceptionally bright-coloured hair—it was really light auburn—appeared at the kitchen door, and stood looking down at her. His glance was calm and steady, and yet I had a feeling that he saw the figure before him with greater distinctness and accuracy and more ardent love than anybody else was capable of. She took no notice of him—I don't think she even knew he was there—but went on working, or rather wrestling, with the things under her hands, so violent were her movements. Suddenly his face changed and his whole body seemed suffused with wild joy and passion. And stretching out his arms, he cried: "I may be mad, but you knock everything in Ballum into a cocked hat!"

Then from the other end of the house a voice shouted: "Eilert, are you hanging round Uhle again?"

At the sound of this voice, which Engel Tiedje had so often imitated in relating the circumstances of my birth, I lost all desire to enter the house, and, turning tail, ran as fast as my legs would carry me down the first turning. I had suddenly made up my mind to go straight to Auntie Lena; she was my one and only hope.

Following Engel Tiedje's directions, I at last reached a large garden with a house at the end of it, while to the left, shaded by lime-trees, was the little stream that ran through the town. Through the gathering gloom, I caught sight of two toy carts before the front door, and some schoolchildren playing, while in the middle stood a plump woman of medium height, with beautiful fair hair, a large aquiline nose, and heavy eyebrows.

She was joining in their game, laughing, scolding, and distributing praise, all in the same lively, attractive voice.

I knew immediately that this was the woman who had once stood at my mother's bedside, and who had fired my imagination since my earliest childhood. So I stopped and looked at her, all the longing in my childish breast gushing out towards her in trustful hope.

When the children had left with their carts, and she was standing alone on the doorstep, straightening her frock, with, as I thought, a very pleasing movement of her arms, I suddenly ran over to her, my heart beating furiously, and holding my gold coin up to her face, exclaimed: "Here it is, dear lady!" I don't know why I addressed her in these words, and I imagine I must have presented a curious spectacle.

At all events, her eyes, which were large anyhow, grew several sizes larger, and making for a bench against the wall of her house, she dropped on to it, exclaiming: "But my dear boy—— But this is enough to give one the pip!"

"But it really is the right coin!" I rejoined.

She turned her large, handsome head, round which there seemed to be a perpetual glow, towards the door of the house, and in lively though somewhat plaintive tones cried: "Gosch! Please come here!"

A rather thin, elderly, clean-shaven man with beautiful white hair came out in response to her call, and the lady, who had remained seated, pointed first at me and then at the gold coin I held out, and, still gasping for breath, challenged the old gentleman to tell her how she could possibly help getting the pip at such a sight.

He looked down at me with some curiosity; then, taking the coin from my hand, observed in a strangely dreamy, thoughtful voice: "I haven't got my magnifying-glass with me, but it looks like an Arabian or Greek coin." And coming closer to me, he took hold of one of the buttons of my jacket and began to fiddle with it.

"My dear Gosch," cried the lady, "leave that button alone! When you twiddle a button about like that you drive me quite dotty! I can see there's something peculiar about this little chap, but what it is I don't quite know."

"What is there peculiar about him?" protested the old gentleman. "Don't all kinds of people bring me coins to look at, because they know I am interested in them? Surely by this time you know that I hope by some such discovery to prove that Pytheas really visited our coast on his journey north?"

"Tell me, my dear," said the lady, turning to me, "what's all this about the coin, and what have you to do with it?"

I began to stammer out my story, while the old gentleman once more began to twist my button as he examined the coin.

But my narrative was constantly interrupted by somebody who wanted something from "Auntie Lena," as I will now call her—for she was known by that name throughout Ballum. First a boy came up and asked for a needle, then an old woman came to complain that her daughter was keeping bad company and she was afraid of the consequences, and so on.

But Auntie Lena listened to me very attentively when she could listen, and once or twice, I believe, exclaimed that it was enough to give anyone the pip. Meanwhile the old gentleman still kept hold of my button as he pored over the coin; but I noticed that his expression as he looked down on me was kindly.

What happened after that I cannot really remember. But I recollect being scrubbed down in a bath by a great hulking servant girl, while Auntie Lena, sitting on a wooden chair and watching the proceeding, bombarded me with questions, which I did my best to answer, in spite of the hard brush taking my breath away.

At last she extracted the whole truth from me, as far as a mere child could give it. I lied only on one point, just as I had lied to Engel Tiedje and the Bohnsacks. I said I had left school because book-learning and the stuffy air of the classroom had given me headaches.

She might have believed my lie but for the fact that in my anxiety to go to a grammar school again I assured her that I should not have headaches now. I saw that she had detected my double lie, and as this robbed me of my assurance I stammered, tried to describe precisely the sort of headaches I had suffered from, and grew red and confused. But how deep must have been her understanding, and how great her heart! For she was not in the least bit angry, and actually turned away to give instructions to the servant, so as to avoid adding to my discomfiture by so much as a glance in my direction. Then, taking me to a large bedroom, in which there were three beds, and having evidently decided not to urge me to a complete confession, but to let me simmer in my falsehood, she put me in one of the beds and left me.

A few minutes later the servant came in to provide me with washing tackle, and when she had gone the old gentleman entered and proceeded with great detail to describe the Greek and Arabian coins which he hoped to come across, and informed me that my gold piece was Dutch.

I was much relieved when he told me that the Greeks had been along our coast about two thousand years ago, for I had begun to fear they might turn up the next day and hunt me out of my beautiful clean bed. He then set me right about Pytheas, whom I had taken to be the Mayor of Ballum; told me he had died in France over two thousand years ago, and, after returning the gold coin to the little bag Engel Tiedje had made for it, he bade me good-night and left.

I believe I must have lain awake for some time, thinking over all the wonderful things that had happened, but also oppressed by the memory of the lie I had told. Moreover, I had understood very little of all I had heard and seen during the last two or three days, and least comprehensible of all was what I had seen and heard in this house. I turned it all over again and again in my mind, and always came back to the conclusion that probably the whole world was a bit mad and that those who did not behave like lunatics were only concealing their madness. But I remember that I had already satisfied myself that the type of lunacy I had to deal with in this house was of a benevolent nature, and with this comforting conviction I fell asleep.

The following morning the servant came to my room and scrubbed and brushed me again, chattering away the whole time in her Frisian dialect, which I could not understand. When I was dressed and had had my breakfast Auntie Lena appeared in her coat and hat, examined me closely, but said nothing in particular, and then took me out of the house to the railway station.

I naturally wondered what it all meant. It was the first time I had ever been in a train, though I remembered Paul

Sooth having told me how dangerous it was to look out of the window. As it happened, there was a man in our carriage who remained glued to the window the whole journey, and I thought he must be intending to commit suicide and ought to be prevented.

Meanwhile Auntie Lena had entered into the liveliest conversation with our fellow-passengers. It did not trouble her in the least that they were all total strangers; and very soon a farmer who sat opposite her was giving her the most minute and painstaking account of his whole family history. At one station we changed and got into a small branch-line train, which was not much patronized. At the booking-office I had heard her ask for tickets for Steenkarken, and I had noticed that she pronounced the word very distinctly, as though she wanted to make sure I should hear it. All this made me feel extremely depressed, and I sat tongue-tied by her side. We were quite alone.

When at last I summoned up courage to ask her why we were going to Steenkarken, she glanced calmly out of the window and said she wanted to find out why I had left the school there.

I volunteered to tell her.

"Very well," she said kindly, "then tell me. But the whole truth!"

In a tearful stammering voice I told her all about Uncle Peter, his house, and his character; of the desk with the money in it, and of the charge of theft that he and the headmaster had brought against me. She asked me a number of questions in connection with the disappearance of the money and other matters which I did not think could have any bearing upon it; but she evidently wanted to form a clear idea about me and my character.

So with the stinging tears falling down on my jacket I told her once again about the death of my father and mother, Uncle Peter's last visit to the forge, and the armchair in which I slept at his house I also told her about Paul Sooth, the headmaster, and the people who might possibly have had something to do with the theft; and in telling my tale I imagine I must have displayed that gift for narrative which I ultimately developed so strongly. When I had finished we were silent for a long time.

On leaving the train we went straight to my uncle's, and found him alone in the workshop. He started up in terror when he recognized me and saw my companion, and, shaking all over, offered her a chair. But looking at him with her wonderful large eyes, she crossed the passage and went through the best room into the wretched little closet that I had occupied; then, sitting down in the large dilapidated armchair, she looked about her. She either deliberately left the door leading to the best room open or else asked my uncle to open it.

When he inquired to what he owed the honour of a visit from her, she exclaimed: "Oh, don't start that sort of rot! Tell me, did this boy, your nephew, really sleep for eighteen months on this armchair?"

He fidgeted his arms and legs, but was obliged to admit it.

"And did you often beat him, and is the apprentice's arm covered with pricks from your awl?"

He writhed like a worm, but was forced to admit that also.

"And how do you know," she pursued, "that it was he who took the money from your desk?"

He stammered and gesticulated. "He did take it," he exclaimed.

"Rubbish!" she rejoined. "Why him? It might have been any number of people—him, or you, or that young lout Fritz Hellebeck——"

"No," I cried, "not him, Auntie Lena!"

"Or the apprentice," she continued, taking no notice of me, "or a neighbour. But probably you did it yourself. You wanted to ruin the child."

"I? I?" he cried, waving his arms.

"Yes, you, you old ruffian," she cried, "and don't fidget like that! You're enough to give one the pip! You murdered his mother and wanted to murder him too, so as to get his property. I know everything. I shall go straight to the court from here, my friend, and have you charged with attempted murder."

She looked so calm and self-confident, and her eyes were so large and knowing, that the wretched man was in a panic. Almost kneeling before her, he implored her not to be so hard. All his life, he said, he had been a poor devil, jeered at and shunned by every one; but he swore he had not taken the money.

She kicked him contemptuously. "Stand up, you idiot!" she cried. "Do you imagine, you old crocodile, that I am taken in by your tears? It's a pity torture has been abolished for the likes of you. But I'll go and tell everybody in the town about you, and everything you've done to this little boy and your apprentice, and how you killed this boy's mother. Why did you leave the money about? You hoped he would take it! You dog! It was you who took it!"

"So help me God," he implored, "I did not take it! It must have been Fritz Hellebeck." He writhed like a worm and tried to touch her dress, but she kicked him from her, making him howl for mercy.

I had been leaning against the wall convulsed with sobs, and begging Auntie Lena to take me away. I could not bear to see a grey-haired man humiliating himself like that.

Auntie Lena stood up and followed me out; then, catching sight of the bony, haggard woman who did my uncle's cleaning for him, she asked who she was.

I told her.

"Good morning, my dear," said Auntie Lena. "So you look after this man's house, do you? And are you alone in the world?"

"Yes, I never married, madam," replied the creature in honeyed tones. "I had no luck."

"You ought to settle down here," said Auntie Lena, and pointing contemptuously at my uncle, she added, "And make that man work for you."

The woman shrugged her great shoulders. "That's all he's good for. But he won't. He's as dried up as a bit of old leather."

"Oh, fiddlesticks," retorted Auntie Lena, "you're big and brawny enough to make him do what you want, surely!"

Then we left, and went straight to the headmaster.

When we arrived he had just dismissed an unfortunate child whom he had been hectoring; but as soon as he saw the stately matron who accompanied me his dignified old face grew several degrees more handsome. It was only when he recognized me that he became uneasy, and timidly asked Auntie Lena to be seated.

She settled herself very majestically in the largest available chair, her nose high up in the air, and told the headmaster who she was and what we had done. When she reached the point at which Uncle Peter had implored her pardon on bended knee, and she had called him a murderer, she suddenly turned on the headmaster and asked him why he had aided and abetted a murderer.

"Surely that's putting it somewhat strongly!" he replied with great dignity and some trace of nervousness.

"Now don't equivocate, sir," she exclaimed. "Do you suppose I don't know you? You're known all along the coast as a bad lot. It is your Governing Board who don't know what you are. Why, in the Schleswig lunatic asylum there are two youths whom you have ruined. And you were on the highroad to ruining this child. Fortunately he had enough spirit to cut across country instead of throwing himself into the river. Why did you side with the murderer right away and leave this orphan in the lurch? Why did you want to ruin this child?"

He protested that he had no wish whatever to ruin me.

"But you condemned him on the mere word of that blackguardly lunatic! Did you investigate the matter? Did you question the old idiot? Did you question that smooth-tongued lout Hellebeck, or the apprentice, or the great hulking treacle-barrel who is in and out of the house all day? Did you inquire whether this child or anyone else spent an unusual amount of money about that time? You did nothing of the sort!"

The old man looked at her askance. His face had grown sullen and spiteful. "I am still convinced that he did it," he stammered.

Auntie Lena raised her large umbrella in a way that terrified me, as I thought she was going to strike him. "I know that," she said scornfully. "And do you realize why you are convinced?"

He confessed he did not.

"In the first place, because you knew this boy was a poor little orphan, and utterly defenceless. Secondly, because his eyes and face told you his soul was pure. And that exasperated you. That's the last thing you can endure, my friend! That's why you ruined those two other boys in the Schleswig asylum. You're a mean swine bent on ruining noble things!"

He tried to tell her to leave the room, but he only made her laugh.

"Don't imagine you can prosecute me!" she cried. "For I would soon prove, and get your sixth-form boys to prove, that you often rave and tell lies. But I don't want to ruin you. No, all I shall do is to go about from house to house repeating this little story. I am Lena Bornholt of Ballum, and known far and wide as a chatterbox. So I will repeat this little story about this child, his little inheritance, his lout of an uncle, who is your bosom friend, and the charge you both brought against him. I can tell the tale beautifully!"

I gazed with horrified eyes at the old man, much as an African negro must look at his chief, and I noticed that his expression was uneasy and that his mouth was working angrily.

Auntie Lena's nose looked very determined and threatening. "All I want from you," she continued, "is a little certificate, which you will give me now. Or if you prefer a scandal, I promise you it will be a big one. So just write what I tell you. There's a pen! Write!"

The old man turned sullenly to his desk, and at Auntie Lena's dictation wrote that I had been an industrious and gifted pupil, that he had never had the smallest fault to find with me, and he regretted that an ill-considered charge of theft should have been brought against me, for which there was not the smallest foundation.

Then without saying good-bye we left the school and made for the station, and I noticed that in spite of her outward calm Auntie Lena was greatly agitated. She seemed really to have got the pip this time, and I looked covertly up at her to see what outward signs of it I could detect. But I saw nothing.

In the refreshment-room, where we had to wait for a little while, she drank two cups of coffee, of which she was very fond, and growing calmer put an arm round my shoulder.

"I lied to you, Auntie," I said at last, "and I am so dreadfully ashamed."

"Ah, my child!" she exclaimed.

"But I swear I never took that money."

"Ah, my child," she repeated, "do you imagine I didn't know at once what you were made of? You're as clear as crystal: one can see through you in a jiffy."

I protested that the idea of taking the money had never entered my head.

She glanced at me out of the corners of her eyes, as she often did, with that omniscient scoffing look. "All right, don't be puffed up with pride!" she cried. "Many a child has done as much out of misery, love of adventure, or vanity, and has grown up to be the best of men all the same. Do you think I would give you the boot even if I believed at this moment that you did take those eleven talers?"

Feeling somewhat ashamed, I held my tongue, and in a few moments she had entered into a heated conversation with the people about us.

I remember nothing about the journey home except that I asked Auntie Lena whether she would go with me to Frau Mumm, and whether she thought I could go to the grammar school again. She said she would see about it, but that for the time being I was to stay with her.

It seemed to be the custom in her house for whoever was first in bed to receive visitors, for as soon as I was tucked up in one of the three beds everybody came to see me in turn; and when I thought it was all over, and was on the point of falling asleep, lo and behold, two children, a boy and a girl, appeared with a night-light. They were a little bit younger than I was, and carried rucksacks, which they threw off. Then they came to the side of my bed and let the light shine on me.

They were lively, healthy children. The girl was very fair, with curly hair. To this day I cannot say whether she was pretty. I saw her large cool eyes—her mother's eyes—resting on me, and I adored her from that moment. The boy was extremely good-looking, with dark hair that curled about his brow; but he had that delicate spare build which generally indicates a certain narrowness or morbidity of disposition.

"There!" cried the girl, "so that's the boy!" And she bent over me and stroked my hair. "See how nicely his hair lies over his temples!" And she stroked me just as if I had been her pet rabbit. "We've known all about your birth for ages, and now we know all the rest. So that's the boy, Ernemann!"

They told me they were the children of the house, that the other two beds were theirs, and that they had been away in the country for a couple of days. "I am Eva," she explained, "and he is Ernemann." Then, sitting on the edge of my bed, and continuing to stroke my hair with perfect assurance, she asked Ernemann what he thought of me.

Beginning to undress, he said that I was "quite nice."

Then she informed me that Otto was too formal and that they had decided to call me Holler. I replied that I did not mind; for, after all, everything in my life had changed, so why not my name? She added that every night and morning she would look at my hands to see whether they were clean, and woe betide me if they were dirty! On Saturdays I would have a bath; and she reminded me that whereas country children were often dirty, nothing of the sort could be tolerated in her house.

She spoke so gravely and firmly, in spite of her tender years, that I began to fear she might be a little tyrant.

CHAPTER VIII

New Experiences

EARLY the next morning, when it was still dark, and we were all up and washing, Eva gave me another thorough examination, and declared that one of my fingers looked decidedly queer. I don't believe there was anything wrong with it at all, but she bound it up, and sternly forbade me to remove the bandage on pain of a beating. All I can remember about Ernemann that morning is that as he was dressing he whistled all kinds of tunes in what seemed to me a most artistic way, and that he mentioned a great play about brigands which they were going to act on the beach.

At daybreak they left the house again, with their rucksacks and all kinds of wooden shields and javelins. I heard afterwards that they were in the habit of visiting friends along the coast during the holidays, and spending their time playing with the children of the peasants and fisherfolk. They were away a week, and I was once more alone with the grown-up members of the household.

My mind was in a whirl. Since our journey together on the previous day I had certainly got to know Auntie Lena better, but I could not quite make out the old man, whom I took to be her husband, and who appeared to be called "Uncle Gosch" by visitors to the house. He was constantly talking about old coins and a certain Pytheas, with whom he seemed to be on friendly terms. But on the third day, by listening carefully to everything that was said, I gathered that Pytheas was a Greek writer who had lived two thousand years ago, and that Uncle Gosch wrote books on one of his lost works.

On the morning she left with her brother, Eva had put me through a severe cross-examination on the subject of my Latin studies at Steenkarken, and placing a book before me had told me what I was to learn up again before she returned. She added that she would cut off my ears if I were not diligent, and did in fact hit me on the head as she came to the end of her orders, though after the severity of her threats the blow seemed somewhat feeble. All the same, I was really frightened; she seemed very serious and determined, and I worked so hard that my head swam.

As it was holiday time, Uncle Gosch threw himself heart and soul into the subject of Pytheas, and gave me all sorts of information about him. For a long time I did not understand what he was talking about, for he had no gift for exposition; but I gathered that it was a matter of investigating the period when the Mediterranean civilizations had sent their first explorers and products to Northern Germany and our coast. Uncle Gosch lived in those far-away days and talked of nothing else. When he stopped talking about them he would go to the window and gaze up the street leading across the bridge to the town, staring out as though he were obsessed. But I soon gave up feeling surprised at all this; for I regarded all grown-up people in towns as rather odd, and, as we say, "fit for Schleswig," where our asylum is.

Towards the end of the week Uncle Gosch came up to see me, buried in a book he had obtained from a Berlin library, and sat down by the window as usual. I took no notice of him, but pored hard over my Latin. Then he asked me to go downstairs and fetch another book which he had left lying on a little table in the sitting-room.

I hurried out, and on entering the room saw Auntie Lena installed in all her glory in her chair, with a broad-shouldered, vigorous young man on the sofa in front of her. They were engaged in lively conversation—I think they were joking, for Auntie Lena was laughing, and her face looked extraordinarily young and beautiful. I took the book and went upstairs.

When I got back Uncle Gosch asked me whether the visitor was still there and what I thought of him.

I said he struck me as being very strong.

"Yes," he said, "and don't you think he would be capable of anything?"

As I was feeling a little bit more at home in the house, I replied that I thought he was very strong and would have made a good blacksmith.

He said that was not what he meant. He wanted to know whether I did not think him capable of any crime. I replied that I did not think so, but that, on the contrary, he had made a good impression on me. Besides, Auntie Lena was there in the room and would see to it that he did nothing wrong.

But he refused to be comforted. In the childish accents peculiar to him, he said that he would confess to me in confidence that he did not like the fellow, and asked me where Auntie Lena was sitting.

I told him she was in her usual place and was in very good spirits.

"I dare say," he replied, "in extremely good spirits!"

"Yes," I said, "and her cheeks were flushed and she looked very young."

He must have noticed the ardent affection with which I spoke. "Her spirit and will are too strong," he observed, stroking his book, "and she can't rest unless she has talked to at least thirty people a day and mothered them."

When I agreed and said that she was mothering even the strong man downstairs, he seemed delighted, and thought I was quite right. Then he went to the window again, and stood there pretending to read. But, as a matter of fact, he was looking toward the bridge and listening to hear whether there was any sound at the front door; for as soon as there was he went downstairs.

In the evening we would sit together round the lamp, each busy with his own task—Uncle Gosch with his Pytheas, and I with my Latin. Meanwhile Auntie Lena, majestically installed in her armchair on the right of the table, would fall asleep. From time to time the front door would be heard, when she would immediately wake up, and people would come in to ask her advice—mostly poor people with their children, treading barefoot and silent. But the mayor and aldermen would also come in occasionally to consult her or to have a chat. Then she would look at them with her large determined eyes, and scold, praise, or advise them, tell them stories and give examples, dismiss them, and then fall asleep again. Uncle Gosch and I took no notice of all this, but sat absorbed in our books, though very often I could not resist the temptation, and only pretended to read while I listened to what was going on.

On the evening before the two children returned from their expedition along the coast I was sitting with Auntie Lena, and as only a few visitors came in I thought I should like to clear up a mystery. So I told her that I should very much like to know why Uncle Gosch had looked so sadly out of the window on the evening when he had come up to me. "Was it because of Pytheas?" I inquired.

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears, and for a while she sat up and did not move, while her eyes continued to fill with tears, which dropped on to her stately bosom. There was something deeply moving in her tears, and I gazed fixedly at her, hardly daring to breathe. Then, plucking up her courage, she replied: "No, it was something else. It was my fault."

Never have I heard "my fault" pronounced in such stirring accents as by that powerful, kind-hearted woman. I was quite at a loss to understand, but, overcome by the expression in her beautiful face, I stretched out my hand in a clumsy effort to comfort her. Then she drew me on to her lap and fondled me.

"You must have noticed already," she said after a while, "for you have sharp eyes, that I am constantly seeing people and chatting with them. Well, you see . . . he thinks I must be unfaithful to him, especially because he is such a quiet sort, just the opposite of me. But it is not true; I love him more than anything in the world, and nothing wrong ever happens. But perhaps I ought to give up joking and playing the fool because it makes him sad. But I can't! It is very wrong of me!" And great tears rolled down her cheeks.

I understood not a single word. But I believed her as she had believed me, and saw that she was crying and miserable. I felt unable to comfort her. How could I tell her that all the good advice and help she gave, and all her laughter and chaff, made up for it all? So I pressed myself tenderly against her, and she responded.

How happy I felt in those strong warm arms! How I begged her, though not at first in words—I could not do that—but with the movements of my limbs, and in the end with incoherent stammering, always to love me and not to leave me, as I had no one on earth except her!

And then somebody came in, and I had to leave her and go back to my book.

At the end of the week, as the holidays were drawing to a close, Eva and Ernemann came back, and Eva immediately set to work to educate me again. I might even say that she flung herself into the task with fury.

She first made me repeat the Latin vocabulary. When—I believe to her unbounded astonishment, though she said nothing—she found that I knew the vocabulary of the whole book by heart, she examined my hands, and, not liking the look of one of my fingers, she bound it up.

She bore a real grudge against this finger, and, after bandaging it up tightly, told me, with severe threats, to hold my arm perfectly still in a sling. I was much too shy and imaginative a child not to take her threats seriously, but although I did so I really felt extraordinarily happy under her tutelage.

At about three o'clock she called me and told me that the play was just going to begin. Ernemann had invited the children of the whole street—most of them bare-footed fishermen's children—to the scullery, with its great black beams across the ceiling, to act a play to them. He appeared before two sheets that had been hung up beside a little table, on which stood a large brown jar, and said that they were going to act a piece called *The Pirate of Heligoland*. A moment later he reappeared with three boys carrying large wooden swords and wearing huge beards made of flax, and made bombastic speeches against the people of Hamburg, taking huge draughts from the great jar between whiles. There was a brief interval when the great hulking servant came in and said that she must have the jar, as she wanted to preserve some gherkins, but she was driven away with threats and thrusts of the wooden swords, and beat a hasty retreat. Then two Hamburgians were brought forward, bound with a piece of clothes-line, and after a terrifying examination were condemned to death. They were just on the point of being dragged away to execution when Eva appeared with a little gold-embroidered Frisian cap on her head (belonging to the servant), which suited her admirably, and, explaining that she was the wife of one of the Hamburgians, pleaded for his life. Her brother answered her most brutally, and she fell on her knees and begged so naturally that I burst into tears. But even in the throes of this scene she remembered my education, for she suddenly turned to me and said in threatening tones that I must take care not to let the tears fall on my jacket.

I had watched the play with the greatest interest, and was convinced that Ernemann Bornholt was a genius, and that his sister was the most adorable creature in the world.

. . . . .

The next day Auntie Lena informed me that she had not succeeded in persuading my relative Frau Mumm to do anything for me, and that she and her husband had decided to keep me. But as her expenses were already sufficiently heavy she was going to arrange that on weekdays I should have free meals in the town, and dine with them only on Sundays. In any case, she added, it would do me good to meet other people. "You are a nice little boy," she observed, looking at me out of the corners of her eyes, "but you are certainly very awkward still, and will be all the better for being licked into shape."

In the afternoon we went out together to arrange for the free meals. She put on her grey overcoat and her grey-brown hat, trimmed with a very thick old ostrich feather. For many years I thought she had two hats, one for the winter and one for the summer, both of which were the same shape and trimmed with the same sort of ostrich feather. But I found out later on that when winter came she merely drew a leather cover over the summer hat, and put the same feather on top of the leather. She was always rather short of money for housekeeping, while for herself she had none at all.

I examined her hat with great interest, and asked her whether she had had it long. She looked suspiciously down at me, for she was apt to think she was being made fun of. I protested that my question was asked quite seriously, which was the truth; for I really wanted to know the age of her hat. I believe I worshipped it because she wore it.

But she did not believe me. "There's a look in your eyes, my friend, that makes me suspect you're poking fun at me!" she exclaimed.

I rejoined that in that case I should have to be very careful in future, for nothing lay further from my mind than the idea of poking fun at her.

"Well, well!" she cried, "just you shut up! I can see from your face that your head is full of quite superfluous thoughts! This hat, my friend, has seen a good deal!"

And she proceeded to tell me that she had first worn it when she was seventeen at her father's parsonage in Wenneby in Northern Schleswig, and that her father was the best pastor in the whole countryside.

"Yes, and there was a youth at a farm there," she went on, "a scribbler of sorts, you know, who wore yellow breeches, and was always after me."

I asked her what he wanted.

"What did he want?" she exclaimed. "Why, he was interested in my hat, of course!"

"And what else?" I inquired, always passionately interested in human affairs.

"Well," she replied, "there is a good deal of water in Wenneby, where my father was pastor; and he said, 'Fräulein Lena, I wish a storm would come, a gale, and that your hat would fly into the water! Then I would jump in after it, and fetch it back!'"

"And did the wind come, Auntie?"

"No, it never came."

"And where did the feather come from?"

"My lad," she exclaimed, "you with your eyes and your questions, why, you would pester a snail out of its shell. . . . The feather was given me a year before by a forester."

"And was he after you too?" I inquired.

"Wasn't he just? Like a squirrel after nuts, always hanging about the parsonage making eyes. He had a feather in his hat too."

"Was it the same one?"

"Oh, my dear boy, no! One day he drew a feather from his breast and said, 'Listen, Fräulein Lena, here is a feather for your hat. It comes from Africa and is made up of seven feathers.' His name was Alphonse. But he married very unhappily. When he quarrelled with his wife she always said: 'Alphonse, I wish the world would split in two, and I could be on one half and you on the other!' That's how unhappy they were!"

I required only six free meals, one for every working day of the week. But she was so happy going from house to house, introducing me and telling people about me, that in the end, if I am not mistaken, she was offered twenty-one meals a week, and I went cold all over, thinking I should have to eat three dinners a day.

I remember that we received a hearty welcome from the baker in whose boat I had travelled. He recognized me immediately, declared I was a phenomenon, and listened intently while Auntie Lena told him my life-story. As she related the tale most graphically I felt that I would now rank as high in his estimation as the chicken with four toes.

In the evening, after dark, we went to the Mumms'. As I had a natural appreciation for beauty of buildings and decorations I remember how my eyes wandered over the wonderful old hall, with its antique cupboards and its stately staircase, the shining brown carving of which shone in the light of the chandelier. We had to wait a little while in the sitting-room, and I glanced round at the furniture and the numberless pictures with astonishment. In spite of my total ignorance of such matters, I felt they must be all very old and priceless.

Soon a powerfully built woman with a broad, coarse face entered. She was dressed in black silk, and wore round her neck a gold chain reaching to her waist.

"Look, Sarah!" exclaimed Auntie Lena. "I've brought you the boy at whose birth we were both present. Give Auntie your hand," she added, pushing me forward.

No sooner had Auntie Lena spoken than I knew there was opposition in the air; for there was something indefinably spirited and aggressive in her tone of voice.

The big lady, who struck me as being extremely rich and proud, replied coldly and calmly: "Since you wish it, I have no objection to his coming here for his midday meal on Saturdays, but he need not call me Auntie; surely that is going a bit too far!"

"I won't remind you, Sarah," Auntie Lena replied, "how pleased your husband was about this relationship, of which he was informed in such a charming way, or how wonderful it was that we should just happen to reach this child's home at the moment of his birth; for you don't attach much importance to such things. But I would like you to remember that the child is an orphan, and has no other relative on earth; and the people of Ballum will misunderstand if you do not allow him to call you Auntie, particularly as I have told them that he is related to you. So please let him do so. It will be a great help to him in Ballum."

I wanted to make a sign of approval, but the great lady looked so cold and forbidding that I did not dare, nor did I have the courage to thank her when she consented. However, at Auntie Lena's bidding I took the smooth, cold hand that did not respond to my pressure, and thanked her.

At that moment a beautifully dressed girl of about my own age entered the room. She struck me as being very slim, and had a particularly fast, long stride, while her little head was covered with fine dark ringlets. She held a racquet in her hand, which immediately struck me as being quite in keeping with her willowy form.

Auntie Lena addressed her as Barbara, and introduced me, begging her to be kind to me and take me to Eilert.

The little girl looked coldly at me with her round, brown eyes, and, taking my hand, said indifferently, "Come along!" and led me out of the room, across the hall, and up the stairs, throwing her ball into the air as she went and catching it again. She said nothing, and as I looked at her out of the corners of my eyes I felt she had forgotten all about me. Upstairs she led me along a passage, and stopped at the last door and listened. Then she knocked in a peculiar way, and said very coldly: "He's got a visitor I don't like, so I shan't go in with you." Whereupon, turning away and throwing her ball into the air again and catching it, she went downstairs.

A few moments later the door opened and Eilert Mumm confronted me. He was sixteen at the time, not very tall, but broad and already quite the young man. He wore knickerbockers, which struck me as being strange, and his coarse face—it was his mother's face—was framed by a wild, dishevelled mass of auburn hair of two shades. His thoughts were evidently far away, for at first he glanced inquiringly at me. Then suddenly his face lit up with genuine kindliness, and he exclaimed, "Oh, our little cousin!" and laying an arm on my shoulder he led me into the room. But a moment later he stopped and looked at me again, and I could see that my face and eyes pleased him. The powerful spirit in his powerful frame divined the timid secret flame that nature had kindled in my soul. "Come along, she must see you!" he exclaimed with a low good-natured laugh, and, opening another door, he pulled me forward into a roomy attic, the floor, walls, and furniture of which were littered with a medley of drawings, unframed pictures, and various papers, while a table stood in the middle.

On the table sat my acquaintance of the sheep farm, dressed in her laundry clothes, soaked from her washing. Her wild red face was aglow either from work or excitement. She wore coarse woollen stockings and clogs, one of which had dropped on to a drawing on the floor. On her lap she held a large tabby cat, and beside her on the table stood a small empty wine-glass.

"Why, that's little Twiddlums!" she cried, stroking me. "I saw him at the shepherds'!" she explained to Eilert.

I reminded her of our common acquaintance with Stormfeld and Engel Tiedje. "And he is my greatest friend," I said, my eyes suddenly filling with tears.

For a moment she was so bewildered that her face looked almost bestially vacant, and she turned her eyes appealingly to Eilert. Then with a mad laugh she exclaimed: "I bet he doesn't half slang me!"

"He doesn't. He doesn't know how to slang!" I replied, choking down my sobs.

Again her little eyes turned appealingly to Eilert. "He was too good for me," she said, shaking her tousled head and laughing foolishly.

Eilert too was smiling. We were all talking in very low voices, although he had locked the outer door behind him, and bolted the door to his bedroom. "Don't start quarrelling with the little chap right away!" he said; and leading me to a chair he added: "You don't know her name, do you? She's Uhle Monk, and she's my best friend." There was no trace of condescension or charity or even mockery in his voice and laughing face, but real joy.

"Your mother ought to have heard that!" she exclaimed, looking calmly at him as she stroked the cat.

Sitting by my side, he had started a drawing of her in red chalk, and through the medley of lines I could already discern her form and the outline of the cat. "What do I care about my mother?" he replied, shrugging his shoulders, and jumping up he went to the cupboard and took out a bottle containing some light-coloured liquid, of which he gave some to her and drank what she left. "We quite understand each other," he observed, "even to drinking out of the same glass."

"You're a good creature," she replied, in the same calm tones, as she bent over the cat.

"Good?" he repeated. "You don't mean that! You mean that I am a human being and no more, just as you are, and that's why I am happy when you are with me." Then suddenly growing angry, he cried: "Is my mother a human being? Is my sister? And are my masters human beings? Why, if I let myself go and play about for a bit, like a bird or that cat there, I am always scowled at. Oh, I know them so well!"

Uhle Monk did not seem to be listening. Suddenly he put down his paper. "Are you human too?" he asked, laying a hand on my head.

Had he seen that my soul resembled his, and that the same stream of red blood ran through our veins? He ruffled my hair affectionately.

"Isn't Eva human?" I ventured to ask.

He laughed heartily. "An old schoolmarm!" he exclaimed. "I am always quarrelling with her!"

I replied that she spoke very well of him.

He appeared highly amused. "Never mind!" he said, "she is a little Philistine, but at least she is one of the best-behaved girls in this town. Isn't she, Uhle?"

"She has fine legs," replied Uhle calmly. As I had observed at the sheep-farm, she had no thought beyond what her eyes could see.

I ventured to remark that Eva also had a good heart. "Look what clever eyes he has got!" she observed to Eilert with some embarrassment.

"He doesn't get them through sentimentality and fine feelings," he replied with a laugh, "but by remaining true to earth!" Then they had another drink. Indeed they had several, and their eyes grew more and more fiery.

I described my experiences on the way to Ballum, and she remarked how easily I might have come to harm. At this Eilert sprang up, exclaiming wildly that that was how the world was made—all that was common and vile was protected, whilst valuable things were in constant danger of ruin.

We sat talking long after it had grown dark. The girl played with the cat—I called her a girl then, although she was married, and I call her so now, although her hair is grey, because she still has that ingenuous astonished look in her face which one connects with children—while Eilert leant back in his chair and smoked a stumpy pipe.

Then declaring she could not waste any more time she got up and we all went through a further door in the wall, and I gathered from the echoing of our footsteps that we passed through some large empty rooms. Eilert was leading me by the hand.

At last we heard Eilert's mother calling from below: "Eilert, do you know where Uhle is? Is Uhle up there?"

"No!" he replied perfectly calmly, and I had a feeling that he drew her to him, after which she ran away on her stockinged feet. A moment later, when for some reason or other he bent down to me, I noticed that his breath smelt of schnapps. At the door of the kitchen he took leave of me, and, stroking my hair, kindly said that if ever I were in trouble I was to come to him.

The school at Ballum was much more human and pleasant than the one at Steenkarken—better in every way. The masters, as a class, certainly struck me as being abnormal, but I was agreeably surprised to find that at least they did not regard the pupils as criminals and knaves. One of them, who was very pompous, had a habit when speaking of holding his head on one side and allowing his eyes to wander sideways up and down the walls. Young as I was, I had the feeling that his pomposity was merely a cloak for shyness, and I could not help thinking that it would have been better both for himself and us if he had remained at home with his books. Another was half blind, and we answered all his questions by reading them out of our books. It seemed incredible that he never discovered this. Uncle Gosch could both see and hear, but he was much too indulgent. He taught us Latin and mathematics, but the boys always managed to lead him back to his old friend Pytheas, and then he could not resist the temptation of telling us for the hundredth time all about the old seafaring folk along the North Sea coast who traded in bronze, gold, spices, and amber—which was far more interesting than irregular verbs. Once we tried to make him fritter away a whole hour in this way because one of us had found a piece of amber on the beach. But we were disappointed. "What is this stone?" he inquired, turning it over in his fingers. Breathless silence! Dumb astonishment! "Why, it's amber, Professor!" a timid voice ventured at last. "Indeed?" he replied, dropping it into the box of chalk stumps. Whereupon, after a moment's tense silence and a deep sigh, we had the irregular verbs! I had not yet been to the headmaster for any subject. He was an energetic little man, with a sharp face and gold pince-nez, very clever and kindly. Although I felt suspicious of the whole tribe of masters I was ready to believe that he was almost a rational being.

Directly after school I went to have my midday meal at one of the various houses that had offered me hospitality. On Mondays I was alone with an old maiden lady who fed me so conscientiously that I was in constant danger of bursting at her table. The next day I sat at a long table in an artisan's cottage, and had a secret tussle every time with his two apprentices, for there was not enough to go round. On Wednesdays I took my meal with a fat old widow and her daughter, also a widow. But I found them rather trying, as they were so stiff and formal, and being a mere child I loved people to laugh and romp with me as Auntie Lena and Eva did. On Thursdays I went to the pastor, who cross-questioned me about my life, and on Fridays to the baker, who seemed to have lost interest in me now that he had a young stork with one yellow and one black leg. I used to sit surrounded by his little sacks of flour, who, since their father took no notice of them, presumably because they were normal, used to paw me all over with their floury hands, so that I left the house grey with dust.

On Saturdays I went to Aunt Sarah's. The table was laid in a sumptuous room hung with the dark Dutch landscapes I had seen on the occasion of my first visit. I sat opposite Aunt Sarah, between Eilert and Barbara. I felt that my presence was distasteful to my aunt, but as I had no manly pride yet I did not mind. Barbara treated me as an equal, and asked me all sorts of questions about Eva and Ernemann; but she was always cold, and we were far from being friends. Her brother Eilert hardly spoke, because the moment he opened his mouth he quarrelled with his mother. And their quarrels quickly became angry and bitter, because, although they both had the same large peasant heads, he was honest and truthful, if somewhat hot-tempered, while she was fussy and stupid. Uhle waited at table. She walked about with her wonderfully springy gait. How I loved to see her clattering over the wooden floor in her clogs! But she used to leave them at the door and serve us in her stockinged feet. Not a sign of her friendship with Eilert was visible.

At last on Sundays I sat between Eva and Ernemann, and Eva scolded and disciplined me all through the meal. If my collar wasn't straight I was threatened with starvation ; if I did not hold my fork correctly I was to have my ears cut off, and so on. But when I discovered that a little girl whose foot she bound up continued to smile imperturbably in spite of similar threats, I began to smile too. Uncle Gosch used to talk in slow, measured sentences, with proud, flashing eyes, about a recent article or book dealing with the old days along the North Sea coast. And Auntie Lena chatted with her favourite, Ernemann, who told her all his little joys and troubles, as if she were a friend of his own age. But when she had had enough of him her beautiful resonant voice dominated the table, and was the only sound to be heard, except for an occasional "Really, my dear!" from Uncle Gosch when her statements or stories became too outrageous.

They were all very good to me—exceedingly good. And when I remembered that, whereas they were under no obligation to me, they let me sit at their table and overwhelmed me with their kind attentions, I was deeply moved. But did I feel at home among them? Did they possess my whole confidence and my whole heart? No! I was a village urchin, and came from a village forge and a workman's cottage. They were all too refined, too dignified for me, and therefore remained strangers. No! there was only one creature in the whole circle whom I regarded as my equal, and that was Uhle Monk, who was half mad. She came of the people to whose ways and company I was accustomed. And that was why, when dusk fell, I used to slip round to the side door of the Mumms' house and listen. And as soon as I heard the sound of her clogs I slunk into the kitchen and called her. Then she would come to me, and show me every kindness. She would give me currants to eat or a piece of cake, would remove spots from my jacket, and help and advise me in all my little childish difficulties. Kneeling in front of me she would discuss all the things and people about us. And it was only when I was in her arms, with her silly red ugly face with its beautiful large red mouth close to me, that I would feel safe and sound; then only was I at home and unspeakably happy.

CHAPTER IX

My First Party

THE autumn brought several weeks of mild fair weather, which, in spite of its being term time, the children thoroughly enjoyed. The moment afternoon school—an institution now abolished, thank goodness!—was over, there came from the other side of the street the cry of a seagull, which Eilert could imitate most perfectly. And then Eva and Ernemann would run over to him with their bathing towels, and join him and Barbara and the other children in the flat-bottomed boat.

I seldom joined them in the early days, because I had a great deal of lost time to make up at school. So I would sit at my window upstairs and work hard. I would work until I grew tired, and would often finish up with a hearty sob.

Every three or four days Eva, who was my taskmistress, and whom I used to follow about like a lamb without any will of my own, would make me join the boating party. As a rule Eilert, who was a good deal older than the rest of us, used to steer, and we all sat facing him in the roomy boat. Everybody talked at once, sometimes making a tremendous noise; but I sat silently listening and watching. I was still much too uncertain of myself to join in. When a bee or a butterfly happened to have wandered too far from land and lost itself on the water, I noticed that it was Eva who begged Eilert to steer the boat to its rescue. Barbara, on the contrary, urged him to go on, and if he did as Eva wanted she tried to frighten the insect by splashing it with water.

Once Ernemann—the "sweet youth," as Barbara liked to call him—stopped at home, because he and his friends had to act that evening in a play at a big party given by Frau Mumm. And Eilert made fun of him. "Auntie Lena," he said, "who in other respects is the cleverest woman in Ballum, is blind in her love for that boy."

"Your mother ought to keep a sharp look out on him, Eva," Barbara remarked coolly, trailing her long fingers in the water. "He does nothing at all at school. And where does he get the money to buy his presents and sweets? You haven't got money of your own like we have."

Eva tried to reply, but her beautiful full lips remained expectantly open, and her eyes uttered an appeal. Usually so quick in word and deed, she seemed sobered by Eilert's presence, and looked at him as though she expected him to answer.

"Ernemann is not a saint, neither is Barbara Mumm," he said with a bright smile.

"You always insist on sticking up for everybody!" exclaimed Barbara with an angry flash in her round, brown eyes.

"Yes," replied Eilert calmly, "because everybody is right in their own way."

This infuriated Barbara all the more. "Yes, but you see, he'll come to grief yet," she retorted. "Mother says so too, and thinks the same as I do."

Eilert's face suddenly grew grave. "And what about us?" he asked. "I should like to see what we shall all be like in ten years' time. We all have our faults, which may lead to trouble. Barbara Mumm, for instance, is stuck up, and as for her brother Eilert—God help him!"

"And what about Eva?" Barbara exclaimed scornfully.

"Eva?" he repeated, gazing at her. And Eva looked anxious; for Eilert could be as truthful as Nature herself, and at times was terrifying. "Of course anyone may have bad luck," he replied, "but Eva will do better in life than any of us."

"Because she is a boring schoolmarm?" Barbara exclaimed with passionate scorn.

"You are making a big mistake!" exclaimed Eilert, jerking his head. "That's only her funny way of helping every one, which she gets from her mother. She has hot blood, I tell you, but it burns more calmly and rationally than ours."

Eva looked grateful, and stroked my hair gently. "What have you got to say?" she asked.

Eilert too put his hand on my head. Their hands met, and they pulled me in opposite directions.

"He's a little coward," said Eilert, "and a sneak, and we ought to chuck him overboard." And he and his angry sister seized hold of me. But Eva came to my rescue and they had to let go, because Eilert had only one free hand. It ended by his holding Eva's hand in his, and I can still see her firm little fingers in his great big brown ones. At last Eva stroked my hair to make it lie smooth over the temples, an attention she paid me at least once a day.

While we bathed Eilert chaffed Eva a good deal. There seemed to be a sort of tacit understanding between these two, and yet was it really so? At all events his voice acted as a magnet to her, while he was so delighted by the beautiful picture she made in the water that I heard him exclaim "Wonderful!" under his breath, as though he were talking to himself.

I looked from one to the other, and felt tremendously proud and happy to think I belonged to them and that they were glad to have me. As I watched them I noticed a difference between them, for Eva had eyes only for Eilert, but Eilert saw not only Eva but everything about her—the whole scene, of which she was only the centre.

As we were walking along the beach after our bathe, the girls with their hair flying loose in the wind, we met Helmut, ferryman Busch's eldest boy. In one hand he had some books, in the other a net of fish.

"You can give me the fish," said Barbara; "my mother will buy them."

He gazed steadily at her with his boyish eyes. "But we're going to eat them ourselves!" he replied in tones equally short and haughty.

Eilert laughed and dropped on to a patch of grass, and we all followed suit.

"What are those books?" Eva inquired.

"Mathematics and composition."

"What good are they to you?" Barbara exclaimed rudely. "You're going to be a fisherman or a ferryman, aren't you?"

"You seem to know more about it than I do," he replied, looking calmly at her out of the corners of his eyes.

I was tempted to ask him whether Dina was still as tidy and smart as ever, but refrained, and watched the haughty way Barbara was looking at him, with a strange inquisitive glance which took him in from head to foot.

"If you want to sell your fish you can give them to me," said Eilert, springing up. "Uhle will take your father the money."

Helmut nodded, handed the fish over, and we turned towards home.

When we had gone a little way Eilert turned round and shouted to Helmut: "May Barbara eat the fish too?"

Helmut looked back and stopped still a moment. Then he shouted back roughly: "For all I care the haughty prig can eat them—yes."

"He says you may, he's sweet on you!" said Eilert, turning to Barbara with a laugh.

"Thanks!" Barbara retorted laconically.

"And you're sweet on him," he continued calmly.

Barbara shrugged her lithe shoulders contemptuously. "You're a bit mad sometimes!" she exclaimed coldly.

At home Eva and I found the others dressing for the evening party at Frau Mumm's. Uncle Gosch was already dressed, but he was reading a book all the same. Auntie Lena wore a fine brown evening frock, and Ernemann was in knee-breeches and silk stockings. His mother told him he looked fine, kissed him, and danced a few steps with him. She was looking forward to the evening's entertainment. A little later Eva came downstairs in a blue dress, which immediately made me cry out in admiration; whereupon they all left for Frau Mumm's, leaving me alone with the servant, for I was not invited.

After I had been sitting for some time over my Latin, I heard the front door bang, and Eva burst into the room, her face radiant. "Aunt Sarah and Barbara were against it, but Eilert won, and you are to come . . . at once! . . . in your big boots!"

Dragging me to the washstand and then to the chest of drawers, she undressed and dressed me again, scolding and threatening me all the time, and saying she would shut me up in the wardrobe for a whole week if I didn't behave properly. In about a quarter of an hour I was out in the dark streets with her. Feeling somewhat terrified, I walked behind her into the house, through the lofty, brightly lighted hall, where girls and women with light caps were carrying in the food and wine.

Then I entered a brilliantly illumined room, and saw crowds of people sitting at a long table, talking, laughing, making a noise, pulling loud crackers and laughing even louder, and toasting and paying each other compliments. Eva ushered me in by laying her hands on my shoulders and pushing me in front of her, guiding me to the end of the table where I saw Auntie Lena. I was given a chair beside her, and a plate and a glass of wine were set in front of me. As I had never tasted wine I did not dream of touching the glass, but I was obliged to eat, because Eva stood over me, and threatened me with all kinds of dreadful punishments if I did not. But I soon stopped, so absorbed was I by the scene about me. Never in my life had I seen so many jolly people. By now most of them, both young and old, were wearing caps, and I saw Uncle Gosch do something very funny. Suddenly struck by some idea—probably about Pytheas—he laid his cap on the table and wrote a long note on it; then, thinking it was his note-book, he stuffed it, tassel and all, into the breast-pocket of his coat. Auntie Lena had pulled her cap well down over her fair hair, and was joking and laughing with three or four young men who were sitting opposite her. Ernemann, in his page's costume, was sitting on her lap, one arm round her neck, and playing with her wine-glass with his other hand. Then an old man stood up and made a speech. But I couldn't listen; I had so much to look at. Eva and Barbara, surrounded by a number of boys, were talking and singing, while Eilert got up from time to time and went round the company, pulling everybody's cap farther down on their heads. Now and again, when he saw Uhle passing along the table with the punch-bowl, he leant back in his chair, and I think I saw the back of his head touch her arm as she went by. I had no cap, but at last Eilert brought me one, and with a few kind words put it on my head. But a moment later he pulled it off again, saying it did not suit me.

"Why not?" I exclaimed, my eyes eloquent with love, as I looked up at him.

"Oh, you're too fresh from God's mint!" he replied, stroking my cheek.

And so, capless once more, I sat and watched the merry company round the table. But my Bœotian denseness and all the experiences I had been through prevented me from laughing, and I sat there with an expression of deadly earnestness in my inquisitive eyes, contemplating the turmoil.

Suddenly strains of dance music burst out from the direction of the hall, and every one got up and danced. After a while I went into the hall also, but I had not been there a moment before the whole company proceeded two by two in a long file all over the house to the strains of the orchestra—upstairs, downstairs, and in and out of every room, shouting and laughing.

As Uncle Gosch suddenly passed me, he cried: "Diek!"—for that's what he called me—"go in there and see what my dear wife is doing."

"Oh, she's passed by long ago," I replied. "They're all up in the attics by now."

"Well, run up to the first attic," he said, "you'll see the procession pass. It's dark up there. . . ."

"But Auntie Lena has often been up there, Uncle; she knows it quite well," I replied, anxious to set his mind at rest.

Soon afterwards the procession returned from the attics and broke up as though with one accord, and in a moment the hall was full of dancing couples.

I sat at the foot of the stairs watching them, and had been there some time, when Eva, her face aglow, skipped towards me, pulled me up, and said: "Come along! Let's go over the house together!"

I don't know why, but I immediately had a feeling that she wanted to find Eilert, and as we passed through each room it struck me that she was also anxious not to take him by surprise. In the kitchen we saw the servants sitting, eating, round the table, with wine before them, and they looked as if they had had quite enough to drink. Eva inquired hesitatingly where Uhle was.

"Why, she was here a moment ago with Eilert," replied the cook, with infinite satisfaction and a touch of scorn. "He likes us better than he does your lot, you know. There are the chairs they were sitting on!"

Another of the servants said that Uhle had gone upstairs for something or other with Eilert, and the others all laughed.

Eva went singing up the kitchen stairs and pulled me along with her. We saw lights in Eilert's room, and Eva called him, but he did not answer. Then looking through the crack of the door, we saw him and Uhle talking and laughing together, with a bottle of white wine between them.

Uhle was speaking of beautiful fair hair, and I knew she was referring to Eva.

Eilert nodded. "She'll be the prettiest girl in Ballum!" he exclaimed with drunken jollity. "But you are pretty too, with your fine hips and your wild mouth, you witch!"

Eva pulled me quickly away, and dashed downstairs. "What do you say—shall we go home?" she said when we reached the hall.

I was naturally quite ready, and we left just as we were hand in hand.

There was a light in the sitting-room when we got back, and the servant, who was half asleep, informed us that while we were away two boy friends of theirs from along the coast had dropped in. She had sent them upstairs, and by mistake they had got in Eva's and Ernemann's beds.

We went up to our room, and there we found two boys of about our own age. My bed was empty.

Eva woke them up and told them to get up at once, as they were in the wrong beds, and took them into the next room, where she said they were to sleep. When she returned, instead of sitting on her own bed and proceeding to undress as usual, she remained standing. Then putting her hand down the bed, she said uneasily: "I can't sleep here!"

When I asked her why, she said it was still warm, and disgusted her.

I was just in the middle of undressing in front of my bed. I thought of offering it to her, but did not dare to. At last she asked me whether I would let her have it. I was delighted. "Only too pleased," I replied, "if you would like it." She said she would like it very much, but wondered where I would sleep. I suggested Ernemann's bed, but she did not take to the idea, and begged me to sleep in hers. "Then it will be all right for me to-morrow night," she said.

After we had been in bed some time I heard her crying, and asked her what was the matter, not out of curiosity, but because I wanted to help her.

"Oh," she said, "that business of Eilert's is so horrid! I . . . I . . ."

Her words cut me to the quick, and I got up and went over to comfort her.

. . . . .

I believe my attitude to Eva changed from that night. The confidence she had shown me made me feel more assurance in her presence, and this led to her thinking more highly of me. Thenceforward she regarded me less as a creature under her charge, whom she had to rule by threats, than as a friend; and she even enlisted my help with her other young charges.

But in other respects too I was becoming more adapted to my new life. During recreation time at school I no longer hung about alone, but kept company with other boys. I began to make friends among my schoolfellows, and to visit their homes and go excursions with them. And I ceased to be bewildered by the many different people I used to meet at my free meals.

Even with Eilert I was no longer the shy village waif, but went about with him along the dykes or over the moors, and stood looking over his shoulder as he painted. He was always painting with tremendous eagerness. He used to bend over his picture, while beads of perspiration stood on his brow. I think I began to feel, even in those days, how much more a child of nature he was than other people.

Little Ernemann too wanted me from time to time. His ambition was to be an actor—a tragic actor—and he wanted me to take the villains' parts. Unfortunately I felt no vocation for the business, nor did Eva. So we used to tell him we had work to do, and would go upstairs and sit with our books. Sometimes Eva wanted to talk to me and tell me things about herself of which I knew nothing, and then the conversation would inevitably turn on Eilert, and I knew she was pleased when I waxed enthusiastic about him. Meanwhile I watched her bright face, with its beautiful broad brow and clear blue-grey eyes, which reflected the calm and lofty soul behind, and she became the object of my adoration. I did not sit opposite her, in a free and easy attitude with my head resting on my hands, but upright, with my hands lying quietly by the side of my book. And this instinctive attitude of a worshipper or slave, which I assumed towards her all through these years, was ultimately to determine the fate of both of us.

Every Friday during recreation we schoolboys used to walk round the market, which was held near the church, the goods market being to the south and the cattle market to the north. Near the main door of the church one of the two shepherds always used to sit, with eggs, chickens, or wool for sale. There was never more than one of the brothers there, though which it was I could never discover. I often used to see Uhle here, her face usually flushed with anger, or wild and ugly.

She generally nodded to me; then, turning to the shepherd, to my astonishment would sometimes address him as Jan and sometimes as Jacob. Evidently she knew the difference between them! Although I was only a child, I could see that she did her best to attract him. She would stand saucily in front of him, chaff him about his wares and his laziness, and about the antics of the sheep, which were left to come and go as they pleased. Or she would beg him not to ponder too deeply on the ways and means of shirking work, in case he grew thin and exhausted. Occasionally she would hum a tune and look searchingly at him, when the stony figure might just give a faint stir or blink. Once I even heard him mutter something like "silly girl"; and he would follow her with his eyes until she vanished round the corner.

Sometimes I ran across Helmut the ferryman's son there, and I watched him grow more and more like his father, broad and powerful. Once he told me that he was learning to be a locksmith, but that he still went to a continuation school, where he wanted to learn English, but up to the present there was no teacher of English.

In a sudden access of generosity I offered to help him, for I had heard Eva speak a few words, and knew something of the language myself, especially the pronunciation. So after that he came every Saturday, and Eva and I helped him. Eva treated him kindly, but Barbara Mumm, who was sometimes present, took no notice of him, playing with her ball the whole time. "Why, his sister is a servant," she said, "and I don't associate with servants and their brothers."

Eva protested in surprise that Helmut was such a nice, good-looking boy, and so strong.

Barbara did not answer.

The second time Helmut met her with us he asked: "Why does she always want to come here when she knows I'm coming?"

I told him I thought she liked him because he was so strong and good-looking. And he was so much astonished that he said nothing.

From time to time I saw his sister Dina, who was a servant in a good family. I would have liked to speak to her; but she looked so strong and determined in her beautiful white cap that I did not dare to. And she probably felt too much respect for the Latin books under my arm to venture to address me, so we used to pass each other with a smile or a nod.

One day I found her in great distress, and to my surprise saw that she could be angry and abusive. She was in a doorway and could not escape, for barring her path stood my friend and benefactor Balle Bohnsack, unconscionably tall, lank, and fair, in his dirtiest drover's kit and a rag of a cap on his wild mop of hair. But he had not got his jackdaw with him.

He was asking her to go with him there and then to the jeweller's to buy an engagement ring. "It is of no consequence to me, my dear," he said, "whether you decide now or in two years' time. You're going to be my wife whatever happens. You know that well enough."

She called him mad, and said she would tell her brother and her father.

"My father-in-law," he replied with great dignity.

With flashing eyes, she told him not to be so impudent.

He shrugged his shoulders. "You see, Otto, my boy," he said in his old-fashioned way, "how my *fiancée* treats me! What a marriage ours will be."

Her eyes flashing more than ever, Dina spat. Yes, incredible as it may seem, this neat and tidy creature actually spat!

"If my calling is not good enough for you," he continued, "—for I am a sort of glorified drover—I might change. But it must be something to do with animals. Perhaps I might go to your people to-morrow and discuss it with them."

Seizing the opportunity, as he turned round to speak to me, she pushed past him and dashed away.

Taking no further notice of her, to my horror—for he looked disreputable—he then fastened himself on to me.

He told me that everything was going on very well at home, that his sister was mistress of the farm, his father merely an underling to the brother whom Bothilde had summoned back from America, and that his mother was a sort of general servant.

I asked him whether Bothilde had even done away with his jackdaw.

"Yes," he replied, "that too! She did not want anything to come between me and the bullocks. I swear she would like me to be a bullock!" But he hoped for Dina's sake and his own that he would be spared that fate.

Apparently Dieter Blank still visited the farm and Bothilde was still in love with him. "He is her master," said Balle. "When he looks at her and plays his fiddle, she's done for—she's far away. That's the way of the world, my son—to every devil its master devil."

He didn't think they would ever marry. It was just one of those love affairs that made the couple concerned most miserable. Only the day before he had caught her sobbing her heart out. And so it went on. But he said he was kind to her—at least, as kind as a "wretched drover" could be to "a ruling princess."

Then he told me he had seen the old "pantechnicon" at Stormfeld. I had the greatest difficulty to restrain my tears, and forgot for the moment how uncomfortable it made me feel to be walking at his side through the streets. But I was afraid he might want to come to Auntie Lena's with me, so I mentioned casually that I had to go to a neighbouring house to take a message, and left him rather abruptly.

It was about this time that, after speaking to Eilert Mumm for the hundredth time about my old friend Engel Tiedje, Eilert suggested that he should come to pay us a visit. He thought Saturday or Sunday would be a good day, and he could go back on the Monday morning. I wrote to Engel to this effect, and three days later I received his reply.

His letter opened with congratulations on the wonderful luck my gold piece had brought me—"for was I not now at the very top of the tree?" He also referred to Eilert as my "benefactor," marvelling at the lofty spirit which enabled him to paint pictures for the fun of the thing, when he did not need to earn money by it. He had to confess, however, that after examining his accounts he had come to the conclusion that if he came to Ballum it must be on foot, for he had not the wherewithal to drive or come by train. He had, therefore, resolved to set off with a two days' supply of food.

On the following Saturday, as we stood on the bank, we saw him on the ferry, absorbed in the view of Ballum in front of him. He had a little red bundle under his arm, and both his hands, which reached almost to his knees, were resting on a thick walking-stick. The older he grew the more careless he seemed to become with his pipe, which he would drop alight into the left-hand pocket of his jacket and leave it to go on burning.

As soon as he landed, Eilert plunged a hand into his pocket and, taking out the lighted pipe, stuck it into Engel's mouth, and this simple act of friendliness at once put Engel at his ease. After showing him his quarters, we took him to Auntie Lena, who, having only just dismissed the mayor, was in full swing.

Sitting majestically in her large armchair, she immediately addressed Engel with the intimate 'thou,' and chaffed him about his behaviour on the day of my birth.

Engel looked imploringly at Eilert and me, but as we knew that he was not in any very great danger we left him to his own resources, and he tried to explain to Auntie Lena that he had never had any aspirations to being a hero, but only wanted to serve Herr Babendiek well and faithfully.

This somewhat mollified Auntie Lena, who then proceeded to chaff him good-naturedly about the big forge door and the little balcony, and even about his figure and his physical shortcomings.

I tried to say something, but she shut me up. If I had thought anything of her, she said, I would have taken her to see Engel Tiedje long ago, but I was ashamed of being seen in the street with her. I smiled, and Uncle Gosch came in.

"It simply means that you don't want to be seen walking by the side of that old ostrich feather," she exclaimed, looking at me out of the corners of her eyes.

I protested that, on the contrary, I was ready to go to the end of the world with her.

She then turned to Engel Tiedje and asked him to tell her about his former wife, Uhle Monk. She said that she could well understand he could not live with her.

Engel Tiedje was dumbfounded by her sudden reference to this subject; his eyebrows vanished for some considerable distance under his maze of hair, and his small sparkling eyes wandered uneasily round the room. She said she quite understood that men did not like to discuss such matters, and suggested that he probably could not put up with her because she was too hot-blooded.

Eilert looked at Engel Tiedje with an expression that fluctuated between admiration and mockery, and Engel, gazing up at Auntie Lena with his great serious eyes, as if he were about to take the oath before a court of law, replied: "She was always fiddling about with the forge fire, and then she would get quite wild."

Auntie Lena then told a long story, which was somewhat beside the point, about some one else who had apparently had trances connected with fire; then, turning to Engel Tiedje, she bade him proceed. She did not allow him to continue, however, but chaffed him again, this time about his name, and once more alluded to his figure.

Uncle Gosch reprimanded her for her indiscretion, and I took it upon myself to explain how poor Engel had been made a cripple in his youth, when he used to work all too conscientiously and zealously for cruel peasant employers.

Auntie Lena looked round the company in amazement. "Just listen to him!" she cried. "A regular stuck-up little aristocrat, if ever there was one!" Then, laying a fine white hand on Engle Tiedje's large brown one, as it rested on his knee, she said: "As if you needed defending against me! We two are closer friends than these people think, aren't we? You dear sooty old Engel! Look how they are watching us! And simply because we like each other! But they are none of them any good. Least of all Holler! And as for you, my dear Eilert, and your friendship with Uhle Monk, you had better look out!"

We could not prevail upon Engel Tiedje to have his meal with us at our table. He said he would eat in the kitchen. But as Auntie Lena would not consent to this he sat a little way from the table, and ate some of the bacon sandwiches he had brought with him, and accepted a cup of tea.

I don't know whether Eilert had intended from the first to confront our visitor with his former wife; but as we passed the back of his house on the way to Engel's quarters he motioned to me secretly to hold my tongue, and led us through his garden, up some stairs at the back and into his room. Engel Tiedje had not the faintest idea where he was, and was much too shy, polite, and confused to ask; besides, he was dead tired after his long walk. Eilert then went out and we sat down. At last we heard the sound of footsteps, and Eilert's name being called from downstairs, and at the same moment Uhle entered alone. She saw me first, and cried out cheerfully: "Hullo, Twiddlums." Then in the gathering dusk she caught sight of Engel, who started up, exhausted though he was; and the next moment Eilert appeared.

"I wanted to bring you together again," he said, smiling a little uneasily.

Engel Tiedje had retreated a few steps and was looking timidly though not unkindly at her.

Her first impulse under the spell of Eilert's influence was, I believe, to say something spiteful. But when she saw him sitting there so exhausted, and remembered his life, so full of self-sacrifice for others, including herself and me, whom she loved, she suddenly gave a little cry, and dropping at his feet and clasping his knees exclaimed in stifled and agitated tones: "I played with you as a cat plays with a mouse."

"I bear no grudge against you now," replied Engel, completely taken aback.

"I know," she wailed, as the tears poured down her red cheeks. "But I have this against myself!" she cried faintly, beating her breast, "and so much more! But fire dances before my eyes and burns my veins." And she turned imploringly to Eilert. "You are so clever, Eilert," she said. "Let him go back to his forge. Please let him go back! Our wild life is not for him, or for that child there!"

Eilert was standing by with a pale face, looking as though he suddenly saw himself on the edge of an abyss. "I meant well," he said bitterly. "I thought you were both human, and could not fail to understand one another. But I am continually reminded that it doesn't work. I don't understand even you now. But I suppose you can't help yourself."

"He is too good, Eilert!"

"All right," he said, laying an arm about her shoulder. "You have begged his forgiveness, so it's all right now." Then he added bitterly: "Men try to put things right! But it's no good! We're going too."

So we left and took Engel to his quarters.

On the next day we took him to the cathedral for Mass. I don't think he heard much of the sermon. The events of the previous evening had upset him too much.

Directly after the service we accompanied him to the ferry, and after filling two pipes for him, and lighting one, we took leave of him.

Later, when I was alone with him in his room, Eilert spoke angrily and bitterly about Engel's meeting with Uhle. "People always want order and justice—as if that were possible!" he exclaimed. "As if the world were not precisely a devilish wild medley of disorder! The Church and society are perpetually trying to reduce and arrange this wild chaos, when all the while it only needs beautifying, accentuating, and illuminating!" Uhle Monk soon joined us, and he continued in the same strain; though she was quite incapable of understanding. To him she was only a dark abyss into which his golden words were flung. They drank a good deal of schnapps together, but neither then nor on any other occasion did they offer me any. He called me his little ensign, because, in obedience to my mother's warning about my chest, I always held myself very straight.

A few days later, as Eilert and I were crossing the market-place, whom should we run into but my old Steenkarken acquaintance Dutti Kohl!

He had grown taller, broader, and fatter, and looked more like a helpless young elephant than a human being. He recognized me at once, and putting his fat arm round me, just as he used to do, said in his oily voice: "Well, little Babendiek, so there you are! For three days I've been looking for you. And now I've met you at last!"

I must have known he was lying, and that he had not given me a thought, and did not even know I was in Ballum. But it is terrible how one falls a victim to such self-assurance, and I asked him in quite a friendly way whether he had come to Ballum on a visit.

"Aren't you aware, sweet lad," he replied, hugging me tighter, "that the poor Kohls have come to seek their fortune in Ballum, and that we have a shop on the market-place? China and fancy goods and . . . but my sense of honour hardly allows me to confess it . . . also a little banking business." And he whispered the last words into my ear.

I said that I was glad he was well.

Pressing me again to his side, he said in his honeyed tones: "I know, dear boy, that you like the poor Kohls, who are making such a gallant struggle in life, and so I beg you to do me the favour of telling me who you are walking with. If I am not mistaken——"

I replied that it was Eilert Mumm, but I am convinced now that he only accosted me because he already knew who it was.

He bowed humbly, and informed Eilert that ever since he had been in Ballum he had been wondering whether he would ever be vouchsafed the honour of entering the stately portals of the house of Mumm, with all its masterpieces of ancient and modern art, bronzes, and etchings, and above all the works of the young son of the house. He confessed that he had long been an admirer of the arts and had managed to collect a few old pieces for his own edification. "I am so pleased, little Babendiek," he added, "that you have introduced me to Herr Eilert!" And once more he pressed me to him.

I was astonished to see that Eilert did not listen altogether unsympathetically to this speech. But the truth was that he took a pleasure in everything in nature, including creeping and flying things. He had the artist's reverence for everything God had made. And I believe he invited Dutti at this very first meeting to come to his mother's house and see its treasures.

When Eilert left us I remained clasped in Dutti's arm, and went to his shop with him. The shop and the room behind it were very much like the establishment at Steenkarken. But Dutti soon led me into another little room, furnished with bright new furniture, in the middle of which stood a writing-table. He informed me that this was the bank. His words, however, conveyed nothing to my mind, as everything seemed to be there except the bank. I asked him what sort of business was transacted in it.

Pressing me to his side, he whispered into my ear that they sold shares, and were dealing at present in Portuguese and St Domingo securities. "Haven't you heard of the bituminous soil of Lake Kibitz?" he inquired.

I said that I was aware that the lake was in the neighbourhood, but knew nothing about the soil on its banks. He told me they were floating a company, in connection with a Hamburg bank, to exploit it. Then he led me into another room, where I found his father busy fixing the prices of the goods in the shop. He still had great difficulty in dealing with division, and I immediately set to and helped. But I was surprised to find that he never wrote the price I gave him on an article, but always multiplied it by two or three.

After having been called out to the shop, old Kohl returned, looking very sad. "Think of it!" he exclaimed. "I have just been paid five marks for one of those yellow handbags, and in a month's time it will be all grey, and in two months worn out. How can people who buy such things expect to make any headway in life? But I can't help it!"

Dutti, who was sitting by me with his hand on my shoulder, nodded and looked proud. "What a pity we Kohls have such tender consciences, little Babendiek!" he exclaimed.

When old Kohl heard that his son had been introduced to Eilert Mumm he began asking me all about the houses at which I had meals. I was surprised that they knew I had free meals in the town, but as I was quite guileless, and imagined they asked all these questions out of pure friendliness, I allowed myself to be carried away, and eagerly told them all I knew.

They cross-questioned me more particularly about the Mumm family, and I was so proud of being related to such people that I told them everything. I believe I even went so far as to hint that my Aunt Mumm was inclined to be vain, and that her son, although he was only seventeen, had a strong-smelling bottle in his cupboard. But they seemed to know a good deal about the family, gathered, I presume, from the cook and her associates, and I only confirmed what they already knew. At all events, they were very pleased with me, and Dutti hugged me most affectionately when he said good-bye.

When I think of those hours spent in the back-parlour of Dutti's shop at Steenkarken and Ballum, I believe it was there—and I confess it with some shame—that I first developed my gift for narrative.

CHAPTER X

Pleasant Memories

Two uneventful years followed, during which I seem to have been at peace with the whole world and friendly with everybody.

Auntie Lena was proud of me. She knew that her daring venture in adopting me had proved a success, though I told her quite frankly that I was not nearly as gifted as Ernemann. For I had a profound admiration for Ernemann.

"No," she agreed, "that is true. There is nobody like Ernemann. Who knows what he will be one day! But you are a fine lad all the same. You see more than most people, though you say nothing and are a little humbug, and will do a lot of mischief before you're done."

When I came back from school she stroked my face, and sang my praises, but her approval soon turned to mockery, and she would say one amusingly spiteful thing after another. She was particularly fond of poking fun at my nose. Sometimes it was too broad, sometimes too pointed, and sometimes too pendulous. She teased me about everything, even Engel Tiedje, his appearance, his life and the letters he wrote me, which she always read. But she never chaffed me about my dear parents, although they might well have provoked her irony.

As for Uncle Gosch, I never seemed to get any further with him. I now knew who Pytheas was, and was even able to read certain passages in Greek authors referring to him; but that did not mean I had drawn any nearer to Uncle Gosch. To reach him I should have had to climb over generations of people long since dead and gone, over mountains of raw amber, bronze, and Indian spices. For when confronted with a question relating to the present he would simply look puzzled and helpless, and answer with a smile and an expression of apology in his deprecating eyes.

I never became very intimate with Ernemann, though of course he was always friendly to me. It was wonderful that he did not hate me for living as his parents' child in his own home! Occasionally he would come up to me and, with his spare, delicate frame quite close to me, would look straight at me with his fine bold eyes and call me brother. But our natures and interests were too different. I had put my whole heart into my school work. I felt I had to do so in order to be a credit to Auntie Lena. But he had stuck in the fourth form for three years, would read novels and plays until far into the night, and had founded an amateur dramatic club. Thus he lived a great deal in the fantastic world of romance; but Auntie Lena loved him just as he was.

"What would you like to be, my precious boy?" she would ask him; for she thought him capable of becoming anything—a great merchant, a great actor, a great poet, or even a great inventor! What a delight they took in making these plans! How they vied with each other in the pictures they conjured up.

I was great friends with Eva. One night she moved out of our room, and was given a room to herself, opposite ours. I did not like that at all, and missed her very much. But every morning I used to knock at her door and ask for something or other, merely to get a glimpse of her and make sure that she was still as friendly to me as ever. On Sunday mornings, in obedience to Auntie Lena's orders, I had to wear a white collar and a white tie, which was not easy to put on—at least, so I tried to make out—and I used to go very early to Eva's door and beg for her help. I would hear her jump out of bed and stagger half asleep to the door, open it, and stand before me, and, with her dear pure face quite close to mine, she would arrange my tie.

I used to wonder why she was not a little more vain, and was rather piqued about it; because I felt that if she had been it would have been on my account. But she used to stand there before me, still drunk with sleep, with her large fresh mouth, her sparkling blue eyes, and her long fair hair falling in a tangle about her face. She was so radically healthy she ought really to have gone about all day barefoot in the nightgown, which reached to her knees. I wanted to tell her so, but felt that if I did it would sound queer and frighten her. And so these scenes at her bedroom door on Sunday mornings, in spite of their unspeakable bliss, always gave me a certain feeling of disappointment and pain. But I continued the practice all the same.

On Sunday mornings I always spent an hour or two with my relatives. Entering by the kitchen door, I had a word with Uhle, and then went to Eilert's room in the attics. He was in the sixth form, but he did not work, and was frequently absent for days together. I used to spend my time rummaging among his drawings, pictures, and literary attempts. I knew what a great heart he had, and used to listen respectfully when he spoke of God, humanity, and the people and things we knew. He must have been nearly twenty then, but his mind was full of deep and difficult problems, and was slow in reaching conclusions about them.

I know now that these hours I spent in his room were not devoid of danger for me; but my mind, thanks to my parents, was sound and wholesome. Thus it did me more good than harm, although I was still only a child, to be associated with this stormy spirit, leaping from peak to peak, and full of the wisdom of the ages.

Often when I was with him Uhle would creep up to the door in her stockinged feet, and listen and then walk in. She said little, and that little never rose above physical things. But what she said was wild and pithy, and pleased Eilert. The movements of her lithe body filled him with joy, and his anger and agitation calmed down in her presence.

Sometimes Eva would go with me, and then Eilert was overjoyed. He had enough self-control to be conventional for a while, and carried everything before him by his charm. But the best thing in him was his red blood, and thus in time a word or a thought would inevitably escape him which frightened or wounded her. How well I recall her dear face, turning first white and then red, and her voice growing cold and strange.

When we returned home they could see from our faces where we had been, and Auntie Lena would speak her mind about Sarah Mumm. "Anyone else," she would say, "would have sacked Uhle Monk long ago; but she does the work of the whole house, and that's the secret. Sarah Mumm is tight-fisted, and stupid into the bargain."

But how essentially childlike I remained, in spite of my association with Eilert, was proved by my feelings when I was moved up into the fifth form. In anticipation of this event I had written to Engel begging him to send me some money to buy the blue cap which I then became entitled to wear. And how proud I was the first time I appeared before Auntie Lena with it on! To my great satisfaction, she had a number of visitors with her.

She was very sweet to me. Standing up, she kissed me and cried over me—she had no difficulty in turning on the tap—and spoke so kindly about the joy my parents would have felt if they could have seen me.

I was now sufficiently at my ease with her to make some attempt to express my gratitude for all her kindness. "Yes," I said, "but where should I have been now, Auntie Lena, if you had not crossed my path!"

Deeply moved, she caressed me; then, calming down, she exclaimed passionately in front of everybody: "There now, you have all heard how at least one person has recognized the trouble I have taken. Never before in this house have I had such an experience."

Everybody protested.

Whereupon, in spite of emphatic remonstrances from Uncle Gosch, she told us how only once before in her life had such a thing happened, when she was a girl of seventeen at Wenneby. Some one had seen her helping with the children, and had told her she was a good creature. "He saw it at the first glance," she added. "Oh, if only I had married him! He is the head of a sugar factory now. . . . Yes. . . . Well, now tell us, Holler, what you are going to do . . . now you are all arrayed in blue and gold!"

"If I might be allowed to say what I would really like, Auntie Lena," I replied, "it would be to go and pay a visit to my relative Dean Eigen of Buchholz."

I was proud to be able to mention such exalted relatives, though, truth to tell, I had heard not a word either from the Dean or Almut all this time.

"Certainly!" she said. "Have you got any money?"

I said that I had twenty marks which Engel had sent me.

"Then you must go *via* Stormfeld and visit your old friend and father," she replied, highly delighted.

"Of course," I agreed, still standing before them in my best clothes, with my hair freshly cut and the blue cap on my head.

"All right, then, Holler," she cried, "just you do that, and greet little Almut for me, and the Dean in his big carriage, and above all your dear friend and father." Then noticing that I looked rather cocky, she added: "But take care you don't lose any of your finery."

I smiled with joy at her affection, and said I would be careful.

Outside I asked Eva to go with me to the Mumms'. She consented, and for the first time laid her hand on my arm, and made me very happy.

When we passed into the hall from the kitchen, where I had received Uhle's congratulations, to my intense astonishment, I heard Dutti Kohl's voice in conversation with my aunt in the sitting-room. In his unctuous tones he was expatiating on the "Dutch traditions" of her wonderful home.

I heard her purring with gratified vanity while he extolled the beauty of her valuable pictures. At last we went in and interrupted him.

My aunt was in the black silk dress she usually wore, and was sitting at the window opposite her guest. The little table between them was covered with papers, and I gathered they had been discussing money matters.

I informed her enthusiastically that I had been moved up. But she only looked coldly at me and said: "Really! Really!"

I saw at once that thoughts of Eilert and of his dismal record at school were distressing her. And then to prove that there were compensations of which I could not boast, she rudely returned to her discussion with Dutti Kohl about the papers, while we remained standing.

So we silently took our leave, and went upstairs to Eilert. He was very glad the holidays had come round, and was collecting all his sketching books and materials with the object of devoting himself entirely to his art. He observed with a smile that he had been wondering which of the three—himself, myself, or Dutti—his mother would have preferred as a son, and confessed that he had been forced to conclude that she would have chosen Dutti. Then producing one or two bank-notes, he said that Dutti had already been to his room and bought a few old engravings, which would enable him to spend a week at Sylt, to study the clouds and the dunes, and the women's caps, and particularly their blue eyes. "I am childishly fond of fresh women's faces!" he cried.

I am certain he did not mean to be coarse. He was above all uncleanliness. But such remarks sounded wicked, and gave offence to all those in his circle who were inclined to be conventional. Eva was toying with the pages of a book, and I saw her turn pale.

I told him about my journey, and after chatting for a while we left, as we frequently did, looking graver than we had done when we arrived.

Eva and Ernemann accompanied me to the ferry. They were going north along the coast that same afternoon, to spend their holidays with friends on a farm. Eva admonished me about my money, and implored me to be careful. As she said this, and a great deal more, she again laid her hand on my arm, and I felt so proud and happy! She and I were about sixteen at that time.

When the ferry had started I stood for some time looking after my two friends, as they made their way along the harbour in the direction of home. At last I turned round and opened a conversation with the ferryman.

He told me that all his family were as lively as ever, and said that I must come and see them some time.

"And Dina," I observed, "is still the cleanest and neatest girl in all Ballum?"

"Aye, that she is!" he cried. "That's what I tell her mother."

"And that fellow Balle still wants to marry her," I added indignantly.

He raised a giant finger to his face and rolled his eyes. "He actually calls me father-in-law!" he exclaimed. "Why, I would fling him overboard for two pins! So you are going away?"

I was proud to think that he had noticed I was starting on a journey, and I replied carelessly that I was going to visit my relative, Dean Eigen, in Buchholz. I believe he really felt more respect for me after this, for when I said good-bye he raised his cap a little and wished me a pleasant journey.

Whereupon my thoughts turned to the object of my excursion, and played about the person of Almut. Would she really marry Fritz Hellebeck? But Fritz might have changed his mind, and Almut would be free to accept somebody else. Hans? No, he was out of the question! So I might be vouchsafed this unspeakable joy! During the three days I had been with her she had been so overwhelmingly kind and generous that I had long nursed this hope. I became buried in these thoughts, and at the end of two hours' journey arrived in the little town.

On my way to the inn where the bus stopped which would take me to the village close by I saw standing at the corner of the High Street, a large closed carriage. On recognizing the two fat horses harnessed to it, and the chimney above, with its spiral of smoke, I hurried up and found the old Dean.

He had grown older and his locks were snow-white, but he was still hale and hearty, and with his close-cropped hair and sharp features looked like an old army officer. He was smoking his meerschaum vigorously and reading an old book, I imagine in search of his beloved anecdotes.

My heart beat anxiously. I suddenly saw that the hopes I had founded on this relationship were built on vanity, for at our first meeting he had hardly recognized me as a relative, and had never answered a letter I had written informing him about the change in my fortunes.

But I thought I must make the attempt, so I went up to the open door and said: "Good morning, sir"—I did not dare to say "Uncle"—"I am Otto Babendiek. I paid you a visit eight years ago with my father. . . . My parents are dead, and I am living with Professor Bornholt of Ballum, and have just been moved into the fifth form."

He listened, but I can't say whether he understood. Not unkindly, but with a frown at being interrupted, he answered: "Really! Really! I believe I remember."

To keep up the conversation, I asked him whether he still had his fat coachman, Kohbrook. He replied that he had, and asked me to fetch him out of a shop close by, as they must be off. "But," he added, "don't rush suddenly at him, it will give him a headache. He's had gout in the head lately."

In the shop I found Kohbrook raising a huge glass of kümmel to his lips. I cleared my throat significantly and delivered the message.

He gave me a poisonous glance out of the corners of his eyes, and asked whether he was expected to run his legs off. "Let him wait!" he added calmly. "Doesn't he make me wait?"

I tried to remind him of my visit eight years previously. "Ha! if you think I can remember you out of all the crowds that come to the Dean's house in a year, you're jolly well mistaken!" he replied without looking at me.

On going outside again I tried to get the Dean interested in the Bornholts and other matters, but he only began telling anecdotes, and I saw that he took no more interest in me than he did in the wheels of his carriage.

At last Kohbrook appeared, puffing and groaning; but he took at least half an hour to get ready. His groans and curses, however, at least had the effect of interrupting the Dean's flow of anecdotes, and he asked him whether he had done good business. Kohbrook merely asked in reply whether any business could be done, particularly in eggs, when he was expected to be always tearing his guts out.

In sympathetic tones the Dean inquired how his head was.

"How can I tell how my head is," Kohbrook replied, "when we are always in such a tearing hurry?"

The Dean tried to soothe him, and hinted discreetly that they must move on to the school at Hohenaspe, as the children would be waiting.

"Who has most waiting to do, I or the children?" Kohbrook retorted peevishly.

Feebly the Dean replied that he had meant no offence, whereupon Kohbrook, with the speed of a snail, climbed on to the box.

When the carriage had gone I turned hastily in the direction of the inn. As I approached it I saw a handsome young man standing in the doorway, whom I seemed to know, though I could not remember who it was. He called out to some dissipated looking youths as they passed by and invited them to a meal in the town, telling them they would get a good tuck-in. Still I did not recognize him. But just at that moment some well-dressed school girls happened to pass by, and from the way he drew himself up and pulled down his waistcoat I knew who he was, although he was already a man. With beating heart I ran up to him, exclaiming, "My dear Hellebeck!" and I noticed that he started when I told him my name.

He eyed me quickly up and down, and when he saw that I looked respectable he was very friendly. I know now that his smiles were half due to gratified vanity, but they charmed me at the time, and I thought they proved his generous disposition.

I told him the object of my visit. He laughed loudly, and, warning me not to worry the Dean, said I must stay with his people. "But how tall you've grown!" he added, and seemed pleased to think that my appearance would do him credit. I did not mind. I was still the little village lad, proud of being treated as an equal by so fine a gentleman.

He spoke in the same old condescending tone about Almut and said she would be glad to see me. I blushed and asked after Hans. He smiled kindly and twitted me with having a weakness like Almut for his half-brother. Then with greater emphasis, though in his usual careless manner, he added: "Mother and I can't understand what all the fuss is about. He is certainly a good-natured, faithful creature, but nothing else—nothing!" And he daintily flicked the ash from his cigarette. "No gumption—no go!"

Meanwhile a groom had led a smart spick-and-span dog-cart up to the door; my friend handed him a tip, and we both got in and drove away.

At first we talked about Steenkarken. When in later years I became convinced that it was he who had stolen the money, I could not help marvelling at the innocence and affability with which he mentioned all the people and incidents which through his fault had proved my undoing. Smiling cheerfully, he referred to Uncle Peter and the headmaster, but I tried to change the subject, and asked about the farm, saying I was anxious to see his family.

Flicking his whip, he told me how much ground they had put under seed, and how much of each kind of corn they had sown. He said "we" all the time, meaning, of course, himself and his mother, who were one, body and soul. Again and again, with ill-concealed pride, though always with the same ostentatious carelessness, he would say: "Do you know, little Babendiek"—for that was what he called me—"on such a large farm . . ." And then some boastful assertion would follow.

It appeared that he was going into the army for a year, and joining the Uhlans in Hanover. The sum of money he would require for that year struck me as fabulous. After this he intended to study accountancy for a year, and then marry. He talked as though he were a prince of ancient lineage, but the airs he gave himself always fired my admiration.

As for Almut, they were to celebrate his betrothal to her two days later in the evening.

This was a blow for me! I was silent for some time, and tried hard to find consolation and support. . . . Fortunately I quickly succeeded.

I relinquished my claim. I even relinquished it magnanimously, at the same time making up my mind to do something wonderful—what, I did not quite know—which would force her to think more highly of me than of him. I pictured her as a middle-aged though still beautiful woman coming to my lonely bachelor quarters and kissing my hand, and saying she must see me just once more, and then taking her departure, bathed in tears. When I was sufficiently fortified by this picture I was able to ask him what he intended to do when he was married.

He said he would remain on the farm, which Hans would manage, and hoped soon to become a member of the Provincial Diet, with the view of entering the Reichstag eventually. And he spoke so nobly and with so much assurance that I really believed things would pan out as he desired.

. . . . .

As Fritz was looking for his mother to present me to her we went through several rooms, beautifully furnished with dark furniture; but as we could not find her we went to his room, which was exceedingly comfortable and sunny. He suggested that it would be best for me to sleep in Hans's room, and we went over to look at it. It was a large room, the dark panelling of which was somewhat decayed. Near the window there was a table with two chairs, and at the far end of the room two beds. He appeared to think that the difference between this room and the other I had seen required some explanation, and assured me that his brother lived only for the farm, and that he could see the whole yard from this window, while the corn lofts were close by.

As I remarked upon the stoutness of the floor-boards he said: "Yes, it is a strong old building." Then he added with a smile: "When I was a child I used sometimes to sleep in here with Hans, because I liked to listen to the company in the room below as long as I was awake. I loved company, and hated going to bed early." And taking me by the arm he led me to a place where there was a little opening in the boards about the size of my hand. "Hans had a peep-hole made for me here, so that I could watch them sitting playing cards downstairs," he explained, still smiling. "I don't believe my mother knows about it to this day."

Meanwhile I had gone over to the window, and at a stable-door outside I caught sight of a tall, thin man with straw-coloured hair reaching almost to his shoulders. He was standing in a strangely bowed attitude, gazing eagerly towards the garden beyond the yard. Looking in the same direction I saw Frau Hellebeck standing talking to a girl. "Your mother is in the garden," I said, and, proud of my knowledge, I added, "and there is the farm-hand Sören looking at the girl."

"He is not looking at the girl," replied Fritz. "He is looking at my mother!"

"But she's ten years older than he is!" I objected thoughtfully.

"Yes," he replied, "but she is still lovely, don't you think so?"

I agreed emphatically.

"I believe the fool has always been in love with her," he observed. "But how funnily he's looking at her! So covertly!"

Then he took me downstairs, where she met us.

Her hair was now quite white, but her figure was still slim and her skin smooth. Did she perhaps have recourse to certain aids to beauty which were obtainable in the neighbouring town? As for the dress she wore, with all its simplicity it was very beautiful.

When Fritz introduced me she gave me a bewitching smile and was, as usual, fulsomely flattering in her welcome.

She refused to discuss my father when she heard that he was dead, but suddenly changed the subject and talked about my meeting with her son at Steenkarken, which I said had afforded me great pleasure.

"I can well believe it!" she cried. "When a great handsome fellow takes to a little boy like you were it must be wonderful! But my dear good clever Fritz showed his taste in making friends with you. Isn't that so, my dear Fritz! What lovely eyes he has! Forgive me, I don't remember whether you have any sisters. But they must be beautiful girls!"

I felt she did not mean a word she said, but on coming to the conclusion that, after all, such behaviour helped to oil the wheels of life, I threw myself heart and soul into the spirit of her remarks, and was not unpleasantly moved when I felt her arm on my shoulder.

I said I was glad to hear of the betrothal.

"Yes," she replied, "as I told my dear good old Fritz, it is God's will. For Almut has some wonderfully fine meadows, my dear darling little Babendiek. And now they will be added to the farm. But how could a girl possibly resist my dear handsome Fritz? I can just see my darling little Almut saying 'Yes' without a moment's hesitation!"

I was surprised that Fritz did not once protest against all these compliments; but I concluded he was his mother's son.

When I inquired whether Almut was still on friendly terms with Hans she cried: "Oh, dear good old Hans! How could she fail to be? We are all friendly with him!"

"Yes, but in the old days she was particularly attached to Hans. Is she still?" I retorted, ever anxious to get to the bottom of people's minds.

I noticed that she grew uneasy, but quickly recovered herself. "Oh, my dear sweet little Almut!" she replied. "Yes, there's something in what you say, isn't there, Fritz? She is extraordinarily fond of our dear good old Hans! She's so sympathetic! Isn't she, Fritz? And then Hans plays so nicely with her. Our dear good old Hans! He is the most easy-going, sleepy, happy-go-lucky creature in all Buchholz. Yes, it is quite true my little daughterkins has a weakness for our dear Hans! But how he notices things, Fritz! We must be on our guard! But now go and find Almut. She has gone to the woods with some children. Just go and see if you can find her!"

Fritz went with me, and on the way pointed out Almut's meadows to me. "One day all that will belong to my farm," he said.

With a faint feeling of resentment it occurred to me that both Fritz and his mother regarded me only as a sort of receptacle into which they could pour their exaggerated boasts. But I was too young to resist his calm assurance, and only ventured to counter his braggart manner by asking whether Almut was not still too much of a child to be betrothed.

He was not in the least put out by my question. Nothing put him out—until his very last hour, when Fate suddenly towered above him like a ravening beast, and he was frightened to death and almost lost his reason.

He gave a smile full of self-confidence and pride. "You see," he said, "there are quite a lot of people after her meadows. And as for the old Dean—you know him—in the middle of one of the stories he is always telling he might one day give the whole of the property away to anybody who happened to ask him for his granddaughter's hand. And we wanted to make sure of it—that's the idea!" And he smiled again. "You will be surprised to see how much she has grown," he added. "She is fifteen."

I asked whether her grandfather approved of the match.

An expression of faint irony passed over his face. "The management of the property," he replied, "gives him a lot of trouble, and the girl is inclined to be spirited. So if we relieve him of his responsibility he will be all the more free to devote himself to his anecdotes."

We were coming to the end of the path and approaching a sort of ravine where for centuries the people of the locality had dug sand. It was now overgrown with shrubs and bushes, which hung over the pit below, and in this medley of vegetation and sand I met Almut for the second time in my life.

Fritz called her. She turned her bright little face at once, and answering, "Fritz!" ran towards us, surrounded by the children. Her form showed the rounded curves of budding womanhood, but she was so slim and slender, and trod so lightly, that she seemed to be wafted along on the air. "Who is this?" Fritz called out to her.

She looked at me, and with laughing eyes exclaimed: "What prince have we here?"

"An old acquaintance, Almut!" I replied with a blush.

She started and tried to remember. I reminded her of the great trees in the wood which had once frightened me. Whereupon, recognizing me, she flew with childlike naturalness into my arms. "Oh, it's really our little prince then!" she cried. "My little cousin! What will Hans say? What will Hans say? He calls you the little prince too, and I had the same idea. It's funny, isn't it, Fritz, how Hans and I think alike?"

Hanging on our arms, she walked between us, asking me all kinds of questions. Meanwhile Fritz, who had been playing with the hand that lay on his arm, carelessly slipped a ring on her finger.

She stopped and looked at her hand. "Oh, the ring! The ring!" she exclaimed with a low cry of joy, so that the children should not hear, and skipped about. "How lovely! How lovely! What fun to be betrothed!"

With a self-complacent smile he observed that it was rare nowadays for a girl to be betrothed while she was still young enough to play in the sand-pit, but it had been quite common in the old days.

Knowing his love of compliments, she replied: "Anyway, you have succeeded in doing it!"

Young though I was, I seemed to see more comradeship than love in their attitude to each other. I don't think he, at all events, was capable of love, except for his dazzling self. Besides, like many a good-looking fellow, he was not very manly.

I don't remember exactly what happened, but before long I turned down a side-path alone with her, while Fritz went back in the direction of the farm. As soon as we were alone we both felt happier and more at our ease. She strolled along at a leisurely pace, as though she were enjoying the walk as a walk, and I had the opportunity of admiring her figure, her cheeks, and her fair hair. I felt her breath quite close to me, and saw her red mouth, and my eyes burned in my head.

Suddenly she pointed to Hans, who was ploughing some distance away, and then called his name in the old affectionate way, on two short notes, one high and the other low.

He looked like the meanest farm-hand, in the shabbiest of clothes, and I could not help asking Almut why this was.

She replied that she did not know; it had always been so.

"But," I protested, "Fritz goes about in fine clothes and a dog-cart!"

She started, but merely repeated that it had always been so. "You see," she added, "Fritz's father left him the farm. What could Hans have done with it?"

I replied that the father might at least have divided it between them.

"Yes," she said, still hesitating, and looking somewhat confused, "but Hans is best at work; he does not want to think or deal with figures, or see people. . . . But come! You mustn't worry your head about all that!"

Hans pulled up his team, and stood still with his mouth wide open, and I must confess that he looked rather foolish for the moment. But as he had seen few people since he had last met me years ago, and had lived a life of solitude in the stables and the fields, he easily recognized me. "That's the youngster from the forge!" he exclaimed in his singsong voice.

As the wind was sharp, he drove his team up to a wall, under which we all took shelter. Unconsciously, I believe, Almut put her arm round his neck, and nestled up to him, as he and I talked; and then, suddenly remembering the ring on her finger, she held it up to him and told him to look.

He looked first at the ring and then at her, whereupon, heaving a deep sigh, and with an expression of joy on his face, he said: 'So now it is certain, quite certain, that you will stay here with us!"

"Yes," she replied, also sighing deeply, and nestling more closely to him. "That's the chief thing—for me to stop with you!"

He said he was relieved, because he had always been afraid that some stranger might come along and snatch her up. Then, turning to me, he asked whether I knew about Fritz and the Uhlans.

"It's a very crack regiment," said Almut with a vanity she seemed to have caught from Fritz—"blue, with white facings. It will suit him wonderfully!"

I heartily agreed. "He'll be the best-looking fellow in the country!" I exclaimed.

"At his Christmas leave they'll be married," said Hans. "What a pair they'll be before the altar!"

She was obviously pleased, but was it at the thought of what he had said or because he had said it while she was in his arms?

Meanwhile, with the tactful solicitude of the born gentleman, he had begun to ask me about my parents and how I was getting on. When I told him about Engel Tiedje, of whom he remembered having heard before, and said that my parents' house still belonged to me, Almut suggested that we should ride over there.

I was delighted, but reminded her that my house was very small, and that we should have to ride against the wind all the way.

Hans was doubtful, saying he could not spare the time, and that there was no need for him to go too. But Almut declared that the whole trip would be spoilt if he did not come.

After dark, when we had taken Almut back to the Dean's house and everybody had gone to bed, I went with Hans to his room. I still could not help wondering why he was treated so differently from his brother, and as we lay in bed I asked him about his family, cross-questioning him like an examiner.

He told me that the farm had belonged to his mother, and that his father had owned only the little farmhouse in the woods.

"But," I protested, "if the farm was your mother's, you as her son ought to have inherited it, not Fritz!"

He explained that after his mother's death his father had the right to dispose of the farm as he pleased, and that he had left it to Fritz. All that he himself had inherited was the little house in the woods.

Indignant at the injustice of it, I exclaimed that I did not understand.

He tried to point out that Fritz was obviously better fitted for the inheritance than he was. "It would not be so bad," he added, "if only——"

"If only what?" I exclaimed.

"Well," he said slowly, "if only other things had been all right."

I itched to hear more. I suspected that there was something very wrong. "If everything has not been fair and square," I said, "I should not let the matter rest if I were you."

"Really?" he replied in his singsong tones. "Are you one to stick up for your rights? . . . But tell me, would I fit the part? Isn't Fritz much better suited to it? Can you imagine me bargaining with the corn-factors, going to the bank, and mixing with people?" And I could tell from his voice that he was smiling.

"It doesn't matter!" I rejoined. "Right is right. I wouldn't rest till everything was put in order."

He seemed to think it was not worth the trouble, and that it would only cause unhappiness to people of whom he was fond.

CHAPTER XI

Home Again, and the Betrothal

When I went downstairs on the following morning before dawn I found Fritz already dressed for our ride, and we were soon joined by Almut, looking indescribably fresh and bright in a blue linen riding habit with a sailor collar. She would not have any breakfast, but sat opposite us discussing the horses we should take, and particularly the one Hans was to ride.

"But I don't think Hans will be able to come," said Fritz, in his calm, dignified way.

"Oh," she cried, her good cheer suddenly vanishing, "you've talked him out of it! You let him think you would rather he didn't go, and then he said he wouldn't be able to!"

Fritz admitted that as Hans would be sure to cut a poor figure, especially on a horse, he would, as a matter of fact, prefer him not to come. He spoke with an assurance it was difficult to resist.

"It's not the figure, it's the man that matters!" Almut protested, and suddenly laying her head on the table saying she did not want to go now, she burst into tears. "And I don't feel I want to be betrothed either," she added. "You treat him like a labourer, worse than a labourer! You never take him into the town, and he feels that he is neglected and that your mother treats even Sören better than him. He knows it even if he doesn't show it!"

I was alarmed by this sudden fit of despondency, and laid my hand anxiously and appealingly on hers, though I did not dare to speak.

With all his vanity Fritz was good-natured at heart—I say this deliberately—but he was ruled by his vanity, and acted like a somnambulist under its influence. "I didn't know it meant so much to you," he said with a self-complacent smile. "Why not go and see whether you can persuade him to come?"

She stood up and left the room, still sobbing, and a few minutes later all four of us were riding through the wood—Fritz and Almut in front, and Hans and I behind.

I watched the couple ahead of us, saw how Fritz tried to make Almut ride closer to him, and how she beat off his outstretched arm with the beech-wood switch she had taken with her. She then came back to us and chaffed each of us in turn—she had recovered her good spirits—and while she did so, I saw Hans looking away, as if he were counting the trees as we passed them.

At last we emerged from the wood, and I noticed how Fritz, who had now joined us, took stock of us all. I too took stock of the party, and could not help observing how well Fritz rode—at least, as far as I was able to judge of such things. Almut was riding astride, and her youthful figure looked well on her light chestnut mount. Her head was bare, and her fair plaits were joined in front on her breast. Casting a covert glance at Hans, who was dressed in a badly cut suit, and riding with only a blanket on his horse's back, I noticed that he sat rather huddled up as he rode, and that his head, with its rough cap pulled too low over his ears, jerked a little with the horse's movements. He was certainly not like us—I mean Fritz and me. But in later years, when I had learnt wisdom, I began to wonder who really cut the best figure on that ride. For Fritz and I were nothing in particular. We were nondescripts! Whereas Hans was at least a real Low Saxon peasant on horseback—the kind of man who, whether as farmer, knight, bishop, or military leader, has made the world what it is—from the North Cape to Palestine and from Moscow to San Francisco.

Fritz was undoubtedly our leader that day. He determined our route, as well as our conversation, told us all about his friends, their large farms, and their great expectations; and counted up the number of uniforms he would require, and discussed where he would live when he went to Hanover.

At a crossing in a wood, where there was a clearing, and we were sheltered from the wind, we stopped, and, leaving the horses to graze, had our midday meal. Then, after resting on the grass for about an hour, during which Hans slept, for he had been working hard of late and was very tired, Fritz and I went to a farm close by to water the horses. As the girl who kindly lent us a bucket happened to be pretty, Fritz, of course, had to stop and flirt with her; and as he wanted to be left alone, I wended my way back to the other two at the clearing.

As I approached I saw a curious scene. Hans, sitting up, was obviously half-asleep still, and Almut, on her knees before him, was trying to get quite close up to him, while he was pushing her back violently and saying passionately: "No, you mustn't do that! Go away! Go away!" She shrank back in horror. "But what is the matter with you?" she exclaimed in low tones. "Don't you like me any more?"

When she caught sight of me she called to me as if she had suddenly taken leave of her senses: "What is the matter with him, Otto? . . . Look! He doesn't love me any longer!" And putting a hand to her face she began to cry bitterly.

Meanwhile Hans, who was now wide awake, had got on to his knees, looking as pale as death. "What's the matter? What's the matter?" he cried, with a pretence of a smile. "I cross with you? Not for all the world! I cross with you! It was a nightmare, that's all! God, how you frightened me! Why, I shall be your old Hans as long as I live! Oh, please . . . please be happy again!"

He kissed her, and she nestled affectionately up to him, with her head on his shoulder. Gradually she recovered, and declared she had never had such a shock in her life.

He was very much upset. He evidently knew what had been going on in his own soul and that of the child, but maintained he could not understand why he had had such a dream. "It must have been something terrible!" he declared.

She imagined he was distressed because he had frightened her, and, pressing her dear little face close to his great big pale one, comforted him with the tenderest words, and thus comforted herself as well.

We then went towards the farm to meet Fritz, and found the pretty girl still dancing attendance on him. He was beaming, and so pleased with himself that he did not notice the agitation still visible in our faces. But we did not tell him what had happened.

On remounting we left the wood, and rode for some time across bare hills. Occasionally Almut would glance back at Hans with a question in her eyes, and then he would nod to her, and she would smile at us both. We were passing through the country I had learnt to know so well when I had lived on the Bohnsacks' farm, and I was busy looking for landmarks. Far away in the misty distance stood the tower of my native village, which I proudly pointed out to them, and in two hours' time we had reached the saw-mill, in the shelter of which I had once slept.

Fritz was horrified at the barrenness of the country, and Almut declared that if only she had known at the time of my first visit that I had come from such a wilderness she would have been much kinder to me. I protested that she could not have been kinder.

The others rode along the coast, so as to reach the inn where they were to put up the horses, but I took a different route, to warn Engel of their arrival.

On reaching the forge I tied the horse to one of the chains that hung from the wall, as I had tied many a horse in my childhood, and when Engel came out from sheer habit his first thought was for the job he thought was awaiting him. Not looking at me at all, he stared straight at the horse's hoofs, and it was only when he failed to recognize them that he looked up and saw me standing there.

I tried to speak, but was too deeply moved. I had grown since he last saw me, and the sight of his short squat figure, as he glanced up at me with his childlike eyes, suddenly brought back all his past kindnesses to my mind.

For a moment he thought he must be dreaming. But when he was certain it was I, and that I was happy and pleased to see him, he gave a sigh of relief and almost sobbed: "My, Otto, my Otto! What a miracle!" and looked appealingly at me.

He did not want to give me his work-soiled hand, but I took it, and then I understood that it was my blue and gold cap, which he had not seen before, that was making him shy and awkward.

Overwhelming me with questions, we entered the forge and he washed his hands in a bucket. But he was in too much of a hurry, and when he wiped his hands he left black marks on the towel. He soon noticed this and began washing again, but made things more difficult for himself by trying at the same time to get his pipe, which was his symbol of a festive day, out of the left-hand pocket of his coat.

Meanwhile I was looking round the dear old place, though

I could scarcely see for the tears that blinded me, as the memories of my childhood surged through my mind.

He continued to repeat: "What a miracle! What a miracle!" as I told him all about Buchholz and the friends I had brought with me; and at last he exclaimed in agitated tones that he must give us cake and coffee, though where to start he did not know.

I had not thought of that, but I knew that in his excited state it would be useless to expect him to prepare the refreshments. "Engel," I suggested after a moment's thought, "there's only one thing to do; we must ask Mamsell Boehmke to help!"

He writhed—or at least came as near to doing so as his squat figure would allow—and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. Sitting down in great distress on the anvil, he looked pitifully from me to the fire and back again. "All right then, Otto," he said at last resignedly, "go over to her."

She had seen me arrive. Her face was, if possible, rounder and shinier than ever. "Auntie Siene," I said, "I have brought three friends with me. They will be here in a moment. You must come over and make coffee for all five of us—I mean six."

She consented with alacrity, and bustling about her little house soon loaded herself and me with all the necessaries, and we went over to our kitchen.

I found everything in my home clean and tidy, but it lacked the familiar touch; and when, instead of my mother's refined melancholy features, I saw this plain round face bending over our hearth I was obliged to bite my lips to keep back the tears.

Hearing voices in the forge, I went back and found my three friends gathered round Engel Tiedje. Fritz was looking down on my adoptive father with kindly benevolence, which to this day I believe was at times genuine, and telling him about Steenkarken; while Almut, who with her slender figure and bright plaits stood like a ray of sunshine in front of him, was looking shyly—almost timidly—into his face.

Engel made an almost distressing gesture of embarrassment, and, with his eyebrows completely hidden by his fringe, allowed his eyes to wander all round the walls till they settled on my little stool. "That's where he sat," he said, "when he came back from your farm, and could talk of nothing but the great big trees."

Almut nestled in her affectionate way against my shoulder, and, still looking at Engel, said how pleased she was that my visit had made such a deep impression.

In a stall near the forge we saw a thin chestnut horse, which neighed loudly as we came up to it. Engel wanted to go by without saying a word, but, noticing his uneasiness, I asked whom the horse belonged to.

Somewhat awkwardly he replied that it was "our" horse, and that he had bought it to till the potato-field in the summer. He added that it neighed a great deal, even at night.

But when Fritz, Almut, and I praised it he seemed to gain courage, and led us across to a corner of the stables where the grindstone stood, and showed us a large wooden wheel, as high as our heads, entirely enclosed in wire netting, which he said was something very special.

Almut, bursting with curiosity, made various guesses as to its purpose, during which Engel's eyebrows disappeared with delight for quite five minutes; and, when he had raised her excitement to concert pitch, he told her it was a dog-wheel. The neighbour's dog ran inside the wheel, and made it revolve, and thus turned the grindstone.

I was beginning to reach the age of discretion, and to see things more or less as they really were, and at that moment I felt that my friend was an unpractical dreamer. It occurred to me that he had bought the horse because it neighed more frequently than other horses, and at night into the bargain, and that he had made the wheel because it amused him to see the dog run round it. Like my dear father he was a dreamer, and that had brought them together. But why should I spoil his triumph? What did it matter to me? There we stood, Hans and all, looking down at Engel, while Almut listened with smiling wonder to everything he said, and I felt very happy.

Then we went into the house. I introduced my friends to Mamsell Boehmke, and we sat down to coffee. Almut asked me whether the cups had really and truly belonged to my mother, and whether I expected her to pour out. God forgive me! With her beauty before me I had for the moment forgotten all about my childhood and my mother, so sad did I feel at having for ever and a day to relinquish the miracle of loveliness and kindness that Almut presented!

After coffee, when Almut had finished examining and admiring the flowers at the window, and they had all gone to the beach before starting back, I left them on the plea of calling on a friend, and went to my parents' grave. I had not been there long when the sound of heavy footsteps behind made me turn round, and through my tears I beheld Engel Tiedje.

He comforted me by telling me in faltering tones how good and upright their lives had been, and assured me that they could see me and share all my happiness. Wiping my eyes, I thanked him and scolded him for sending me so much money in Ballum.

He smiled and said the forge could well afford it, and when I asked him about the account-book, and expressed my doubts about the way it was kept, he started and asked thoughtfully whether, if it were wrong, my parents would have kept it like that.

But I was not convinced, for I feared my dear parents had been none too good at book-keeping either. However, we returned home quite united and happy, though on our way we were suddenly startled by hearing cries behind us, and saw Almut running after us as fast as she could from the beach. Her hair was slightly dishevelled, and her clothes were flying in the wind. We could not understand. At last we could hear what she was shouting. Engel's pocket was burning! And it turned out that he had put his pipe away alight—a bad habit he had got into lately.

Soon afterwards we had mounted our horses and were wishing our little host good-bye.

As I write these lines I am conscious of having acted somewhat arrogantly and conceitedly the whole of that day, and of having been lacking in sincerity. I probably behaved in this way in order to appear big both before Almut and the old friend of my childhood, and I remember that it was Hans's deep eyes that prevented me from going too far. But I was also actuated to a certain extent no doubt by the desire to make it a red-letter day, not only for myself but also for my friends.

On the way back I rode in front with Fritz, as Almut had asked to be allowed to remain with Hans. But I kept watch on them surreptitiously, and overheard her begging him to let her sit in front of him on his horse, because her knee was hurting her. Although he knew this could be quite easily managed on his great camel of a horse, particularly as he was riding on a blanket, he raised objections at first and said it was impossible. But she insisted, saying she would certainly fall off if he would not let her. I looked at Fritz, but he did not seem to have heard a word.

So when I turned round a moment later I was not surprised to see that Hans had taken her on to his own horse, and was riding with her nestling in his arms in front of him. She was letting her head lie dreamily against his manly chest, and her bright little face presented a strange contrast to the plain, foolish sunburnt mask above it.

. . . . .

On the following day I tried to keep away from her, as I felt ill-at-ease in her presence. But it was no good; she wanted me to be with her the whole time, and we repeated our first walk through the woods.

She spoke so constantly of Hans that at last I protested: "Surely Fritz is better-looking than Hans? Hans is ugly."

Staring in astonishment, she repeated: "Hans—ugly? I don't know."

"And so untidy," I added.

"Yes," she said, nodding unconcernedly, "he is just Hans!" And she pronounced his name on two notes so tenderly that I heaved an agonized sigh.

At last we came up to him ploughing, and she asked to be allowed to go round the field with him. Resting her hand on his shoulder we started off, and as they became more and more wrapped up in each other I gradually ceased to listen, and became absorbed in my own thoughts. I conjured up a picture of the future, in which I saw myself returning to the farm year after year to witness the happiness of the two at my side, and growing into a white-haired old bachelor, something like Uncle Gosch. I felt convinced that by that time I should have made a great name for myself in some way or other, and that these two at my side and the whole world would respect me.

Almut and I also went for a drive with her grandfather the Dean in his smoky carriage. At the time I could not understand why I was so bored by his eternal story-telling, and why his anecdotes seemed to be so pointless. But I know now. It was because he always omitted the most important details—everything connected with the souls of the people he mentioned. And if I happened to refer to such matters he always went on without paying the slightest attention to my remark. I felt the contrast between us—I always instinctively ferreting to the root of everything, and he passing superficially over the surface. He was probably the first human being whom I judged objectively.

We often stopped at inns on the way, to allow Kohbrook, the coachman, to transact his business in eggs and butter; when he reappeared his nose always seemed to be bigger and redder.

When the Dean's business for the day was done, and Kohbrook had to be fetched from a neighbouring bar to drive us back, he made a great to-do over his preparations, grumbling all the time at the terrible way he was hustled, and protesting that at his age he could not be expected to work his fingers raw.

On the way back the Dean told us tales of his army days. Almut took some interest in these, probably because they were about a young subaltern, and curling up on the cushions, with her slim legs outstretched, she listened dreamily, humming to herself. I could not make out how she managed to look so fresh and blooming in the stifling smoke. But I loved her more than I can say, and felt terribly sad.

That evening a little dinner was given in the large hall of the farm, a sort of betrothal-feast, which was also intended as a send-off for Fritz, who was leaving for Hanover.

When I saw the table I asked Almut why the two maidservants were not dining with us as usual, although Sören, the farm-hand, was to be there. "Oh, he always comes," she replied.

Just at that moment Frau Hellebeck, looking radiant with her white hair and dark silk frock, entered with one of the maidservants. "You've laid a place for Sören, haven't you?" she asked. Then, turning her beautiful face to me, she added: "One must always be kind to people, mustn't one, my dear good little Babendiek? Yes, indeed!"

The others now came in and took their places. I found myself between Almut and Hans, facing the older members of the company. This was Almut's idea, and how pleased I was at every sign of favour she showed me!

After the soup the Dean rose and proposed the toast. He spoke in smooth, polished sentences, like a regular old after-dinner speaker. Waxing eloquent over the son of the house and his blameless record, he foretold a successful year for him as a soldier, to be crowned by his marriage with a beautiful young wife—"if possible, one who would bring him the fine meadows that he lacked"—and happiness and every kind of honour and good fortune thereafter. It was like thousands of similar toasts—blasphemous in its thoughtless pomposity and arrogance!

Frau Hellebeck leant across the table, and with the sweet smile that never left her, said: "Wasn't that wonderful, my dear good Fritz? You ought really to feel proud, and you too, Almut!" Then, turning to me, she added: "I can well imagine how astonished you must be, my dear good little Babendiek. I'm sure you've never heard anything like that before!"

With some embarrassment I agreed, for I believed all the prophecies I had heard.

"And how fitting and right it was," continued Frau Hellebeck, "that Uncle Eigen should not have mentioned Hans! Not a word! Why should he make any special mention of you? Isn't that so, my dear good old Hans! There's no need to mention your name, because you are included in every speech as a matter of course; like the rest of us, you belong to the farm." And she patted him on the back, nodding affectionately. "When Sören and I—isn't that so, my dear Sören?—are too old to work, and Fritz is in Parliament, you will manage the whole property. For my dear good Fritz is too clever to be always sitting at home."

I saw them all smiling, and noticed Hans's deep-set eyes looking from his mother to Sören with a searching, questioning glance. Sören was sitting there, with his broad thin face and stooping shoulders, stealthily watching the dazzling white-haired woman, and, careful though he was, I could see dumb lust in the depths of his eyes.

Suddenly I was all ears. The Dean was talking about the death of Herr Hellebeck, and I had an idea that Hans raised his head and ceased to attend to Almut's chatter. Frau

Hellebeck tried to change the subject, but the Dean always trampled rough-shod over everything connected with the spirit, and turning to her observed in his story-telling tone of voice: "He died in this very room, to be sure, didn't he, my dear? Of course! I remember, he died here, in that recess!"

"Yes," said Frau Hellebeck, "he wanted fresh air, and this is the loftiest room in the house." I could see from her eyes that she was wondering how to change the subject. But her mind seemed paralysed; she could think of nothing, and was obliged to let the Dean continue.

To him it was merely a story like any other. "Yes, I remember," he went on, "you told me when I came that Sören had carried him in here, and that an hour or two later he had had an attack which ended in death."

I believe I was the only one present who noticed how uncomfortable some of the party had become, though their faces did not change. Frau Hellebeck looked at me. I believe she did not trust my eyes, and thought they were more piercing and saw more than other people's.

The Dean was as inquisitive as an old washerwoman. "I believe," he said, "that Hans, as a child, spoke of his father wanting something at the end. What could it have been? . . . You must have been about nine then, Hans. . . . Yes? . . . I believe you actually told me about it. Yes, you did. How remarkable, my dear! Don't you remember?"

Frau Hellebeck shook her white head.

"My father wanted Sören to ride into the town," Hans replied in his sleepy, singsong voice.

"But how do you know?"

"I was sleeping in the room above this, where I am sleeping now. I heard it."

The Dean was burning with curiosity, and his eyes shone; for after all it was another anecdote! "What did he want, my dear boy? What could he have wanted?"

"My father insisted. He wanted it very badly. He tried to raise himself up in bed. He even tried to get out of bed."

"Do you remember, Sören?" asked the Dean.

"Yes," said Hans. "Sören remembers. Didn't he hold him down?"

"Sören?" cried the Dean. "And what then?"

"Well," Hans continued, "very soon after that my father lay down quite quiet and went to sleep. And then he was dead, because I saw Sören take a handkerchief that happened to be there and lay it on his face. That's how I knew he was dead."

"Really, really!" exclaimed the Dean. "And an hour later I came with Dr Persen and saw him lying there."

"Yes," replied Hans, in his slow singsong, which was always so calm and measured, "I can see it still. . . . You came and remained standing at the table."

The Dean smiled. "I remained at the table, did I? Yes, my dear boy. I can't bear to look at the dead."

"Yes," continued Hans, "but Dr Persen went to the bed, took the handkerchief from my father's face, and whistled."

The Dean smiled again. "Quite right," he said. "And when I accused him of being drunk he said it wasn't that at all, but that he had whistled because the dead man had such a terrified expression on his face." Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "But, my dear boy," he cried in shrill tones, "how do you know all this? You talk as though you had seen it all. But you weren't in the room, were you?"

Hans looked first at his mother and then at the Dean. "But I saw it all the same," he replied calmly.

"Saw it?" Frau Hellebeck exclaimed.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Weren't Fritz and I sleeping just overhead? Fritz always wanted to look at the company when he was sent to bed, and I had made a little spy-hole for him in the boards, so that he could lie on the floor and look down. But that night it was I who lay on the floor."

Until this moment Frau Hellebeck seemed to have been held spellbound, unable to stop the conversation. But she now wrenched herself free, as it were, and in a harsh voice said to Sören: "How's that mare getting on, Sören? I think you ought to go and have a look at her."

The man jumped up with a little cry—or was it merely my fancy? In any case, I looked up at him. I wanted to see his sallow face, which had struck me because it was so pale. But I could not see it, because he had already turned away, though as I watched his great stooping form shuffle away he seemed to be staggering.

While Sören was shuffling out the Dean commented on the extraordinary features of the story. As far as I could tell, Fritz had not paid much attention to the conversation, but had been busy drawing something. The others began talking and Frau Hellebeck gave instructions to the maidservants. As every one began to move I sank into a reverie, picturing the scenes that had just been described.

On the following morning, when Hans was already out in the fields, Almut and Fritz drove me to the town in their fine trap. Fritz said he might be coming to Ballum presently on business. I was glad to hear this, for I was very proud of him, and said I would get Auntie Lena to invite Almut, as I felt sure she and Eva would be good friends. We discussed these plans until I bade them good-bye at the station. Then they drove away and I was alone.

CHAPTER XII

The Green Wood Warps Badly

After this journey there followed a period of restlessness, which I have little pleasure in looking back upon. As a matter of fact I had ceased to be a mere schoolboy.

I knew for certain that I was no longer a schoolboy, for I began to dog the footsteps of a girl who was not a mere child either. She was the daughter of a peasant, and came every Friday to Ballum with eggs and butter which she sold close by the shepherds' barrow. Her face attracted me one day after I had been talking to Uhle Monk. It was weather-beaten and covered with freckles. But her eyes seemed to question me, and I was curious to know the nature of their inquiry. I was also filled with qualms. It was blowing up for a storm, and on her way home she might be blown into a ditch and drowned, or she might meet another young man and never return to the market. I saw her coming out of a shop, and waited. I hoped to catch her eye. Eyes are always the chief attraction with me. Then suddenly Barbara Mumm came along. She looked coldly at the girl and then in astonishment at me, and seemed to take in the situation. Her look was enough! In an instant I understood. I knew I had shown bad taste and must go away. I blushed vividly, and turned round, and for the next few days blushed again and again every time I thought that perhaps Barbara had told Eva all about it.

The next attraction was a very slim girl with beautifully straight legs. I confess that she wore her shoes down on one side, but some feet always do that, however careful their owner may be. I met her on three different occasions, and looked into her eyes. Yes, there was a question in them for me, and she gave a faint little smile as they asked it. There seemed to be an understanding between us, and I followed her about everywhere. On the following day, after meeting her for the fourth time, I made up my mind not to lose sight of her, even if I had to walk as far as the beach. Unfortunately, as she reached a certain turning, who should appear but Helmut and Dina, the ferryman's children, and I had to stop and talk to them. And as they were by far the cleanest and best-groomed couple in the town, I suddenly felt there was something dirty about the girl I had been pursuing. Yes, I felt sure she was not clean, and I asked them whether they knew her.

Yes, they knew her. She was lazy and lousy, and went from job to job. I cannot describe how scornfully their two pairs of eyes flashed, and how Dina's cheeks shone, as they told me this! And again I blushed.

A few days later when I chanced to meet Dina and asked her how Balle Bohnsack was she looked angrily at me and called him a cattle-drover. Her expression was such that I had no alternative but to acknowledge that he might take more pains with his clothes and his manners. Working myself up, I heaped abuse upon his head, and conceived the daring plan of paying court to her myself, and freeing her from Balle. So I asked her whether she ever went out in the evening. She replied that she did. Whereupon I invited her to go for a walk with me.

Once more her eyes flashed angrily. No, never! Though she admitted that some girls went out in the evenings with young men, or even with the boys!

For the moment I did not see the point of her distinction between young men and the boys, but a moment's reflection made it clear. By "the boys" she meant the grammar school boys, and she saw no difference between the fourth and fifth form. So to my great chagrin I was forced to abandon my plan!

Although I was now in the sixth form I felt that there must be something unstable in my character, for I seemed to have had a fresh love every three months. And it was not mere tomfoolery; it was deadly serious.

I met the last girl at one of the houses where I had free meals. She was a flapper, with small bright blue eyes and her hair in a plait. She used to sit opposite me and the son of the house, who was also a sixth-form boy, and we engaged in a war to the knife for her favours. He tried to impress her by being so proud and stiff that his mother asked him whether he was suffering from lumbago. I, for my part, relied on my hair, and to enhance its charm I bought a box of pomade for a mark. Unfortunately, I forgot that it was perfumed, and was aghast when I saw Auntie Lena's fine nose sniffing sarcastically. Once when I unexpectedly met the girl in the street I had the misfortune to drop my red cap in the gutter when I greeted her. My rival saw it and laughed scornfully. But a few days later, when he was looking spellbound at her, he upset a plateful of soup in his lap, and when I smiled scornfully she smiled back at me!

My victory was complete and decisive. After supper I went to meet her in the back garden, and we chatted and felt very proud and happy. She confessed that it was my hair that had captivated her, and that however many sweethearts she might have in the future she would never forget it. I, on the other hand, assured her that it was her walk that had "intoxicated" me—I had long intended to use this word—and she allowed me to kiss her. She then informed me that her father had a soap factory, and I determined on the spot to study the chemistry of soap, so that my father-in-law might one day take me to his heart! My love had added years to my age. I felt I was a man!

Then one day it all came to an end. I was hanging about for her—we wanted to see each other every moment of the day —when, lo and behold! I saw Balle Bohnsack coming down the street with a drove of calves. Suddenly he stopped quite close to me, in his dirty linen overalls, and his ghastly old cap on the back of his head, and, seizing my arm, shouted words of command to his cattle. I hastily pleaded that I must fly home as I had a composition to write.

"What about?" he inquired.

Meanwhile a calf had taken a fancy to one of the shops, and was trying to enter it. Balle called to the group of girls—with me standing by him, if you please!—to coax the beast and lure him away. The young ladies remained dumb, of course, and passed on.

Eventually Balle had to release me to see to his cattle, and I breathed at last. But as he was carried away what should he do but shout at me—loud enough for the whole street to hear —that I must have caught cold, as I seemed to have no voice, and that I had better tie a wet stocking round my throat that night!

That finished it!

As a matter of fact I was hoarse, and Auntie Lena, who always dreaded I might develop my father's trouble, ordered me to bed for three days, and added that, to spare my voice, no one was to come near me.

Nevertheless they all came, and I spent three glorious days.

My first visitor was Uncle Gosch, who, wet through and with his boots all muddy, came in after a long walk to talk to me about Pytheas.

Then Ernemann came. He was always kind to me. He was too frail and sensitive for the fate that ultimately overtook him. Standing by my bed, he looked at me, and observing that I was not smart enough he decorated my nightshirt with geraniums. Then, sitting by my side, he played with a flower-stand that he had made for his mother.

Eva also visited me. The first thing she did was to put a fresh bandage round my neck, and threatened me with the most terrible consequences if I touched it. Then, sitting on the side of my bed, she told me to put my knees up, and leant against them as she was very tired. And thus we chatted in the twilight. At first it was rather trying for me, because she talked about the girl with the plait, and about the walk along the dyke, where there was always a cold wind blowing. She knew everything! Then leaning forward to make sure that my neck was still covered, she tapped me gently on the cheek. It was wonderful! I could think of nothing on earth more delightful than being ill and chatting with Eva.

The second evening she sat talking to me she complained that Ernemann was very lazy and frivolous, and declared that Auntie Lena gave him too much money. I could not understand her fears, and argued with her, enumerating his various gifts—he could sing, play the violin, write poetry, act, and carve wood. But she shook her head. Then to cheer her up I began to talk about Eilert and praised him to the skies. She agreed, but pointed out that he was too passionate and unreliable. She said no more, but I knew she was thinking of his love of drink and his attachment to Uhle Monk. I tried to comfort her, but it was no good.

On the fourth day I went back to school, but I was completely changed. I had given up all thoughts of girls, and, concentrating entirely on my work, resolved at all costs to distinguish myself in everything.

At first I felt very despondent, owing to the shining lights above me. There were two in particular who troubled me. One was a great scholar, who was extraordinarily good at Latin prose and at Greek and history, and I looked up to him in awe. The other, although not particularly brilliant at classics, knew a great deal about German poetry from the earliest times, and had founded a club, where he gave lectures. Not only did he write his own compositions, but he also produced compositions for the whole of the fifth and lower sixth forms, at the rate of two marks apiece. I knew nothing about the details of Goethe's childhood, or whether he had written compositions for others at the rate of two marks apiece, but I had an idea that this young man promised to be a second Goethe, and I felt quite incapable of ever attaining the level of these two stars.

Nevertheless my industry bore fruit. I distinguished myself. I was top in Latin in the lower sixth, and wrote an essay on the moral aspects of Mary Stuart that caused a stir. In a single afternoon I sold five compositions at one mark apiece, all of which were marked more or less "good." I worked like mad, and inspired my masters with the hope that in the following year I would emulate the two shining lights in the upper sixth.

I began to feel that I was destined to be either a poet or a statesman. Twenty stanzas written about Almut pointed to the first, and an essay on the political aspects of *Wallenstein* to the second alternative.

I blossomed out. One stormy day in the autumn a flock of geese flew across the beach from the foreland and landed in Ballum. The storm became a hurricane. Tiles were blown down from the roofs into the streets, and the five hundred geese were terrified. Suddenly the whole of Ballum was covered by a fluttering, cackling cloud of feathers, as the geese flew from roof to roof and window to window, and hurtled through the air above our heads. Inspired by this spectacle, I wrote that same night a poem of ten short stanzas describing the feathery confusion, and sent it to the editor of the *Ballum News*, asking him to keep the author's identity a secret, though I hoped he would not do so. But when, on the following day, the readers of the *News* waxed indignant over the poem, as an insult to the women of the town, my heart grew so faint that for a fortnight I crept about in a state of extreme trepidation.

Whereupon, abandoning books, I indulged my main bent and turned my attention to living people. I began by prolonging my stay at the houses where I took my free meals, and engaging my hosts in post-prandial conversation. Twice, for instance, I stayed two hours with the old maid with whom I lunched on Wednesdays, and listened to tales of her native village. I also frequently stopped on with the baker and his children, and began giving Helmut lessons in English and mathematics again. I had given up helping him for a while to devote more time to my school work, but I really enjoyed working with him, as I have always loved associating with plain working-folk.

Occasionally I would go with Helmut to see his people and meet his father down at the ferry. Old Busch was proud of his son, and vowed he would be the best sergeant-major in Kaiser Wilhelm's army. I suggested that there were other possibilities, but he would not hear of them. He said that a sergeant-major was more important than a captain and even than a king. Why? Because he knew every one of his men, and was familiar with every detail of their kit and equipment down to the last button.

I said I often met Dina, and asked whether he knew that Balle Bohnsack was still pressing his attentions upon her.

He shook with silent laughter. "That scavenger fellow!" he cried.

As I still felt indignant with my old friend, I made no attempt to defend him.

"Just fancy," he cried, "my Dina, my spotless Dina, and that—that—oh, words fail me!" And he began to praise his wife and her housekeeping.

Once when Helmut and I were returning from one of these trips we met Eilert and Barbara on the dyke. We stopped to talk to them for a moment, and I noticed that Barbara looked disdainfully at my friend. When I turned to him I saw he had a similar expression on his face. Then he left us, and I went on with the others.

"Surely he's not fit company for you!" said Barbara, turning her little head to me, when we were out of earshot.

I protested that she had always been against him even as a child.

Eilert laughed softly. He said he had already explained the reason to me, and, knowing how outspoken he was, she cried: "Shut up! I don't want to hear!"

"All the same, I will tell you again," he said carelessly. "He appeals to you for the same reason that Dutti Kohl appeals to you."

I avoided speaking to Barbara, because we did not happen to be friends just then. But I could not help exclaiming in astonishment: "Dutti Kohl! Surely not!"

"It's nonsense!" she cried. "He only says so."

"When you were a baby," continued Eilert, "and first saw the ferry, you insisted on going to Helmut's father, and would not be satisfied till you were in his arms. And Helmut is growing as big as his father."

"But what about Dutti Kohl?" I objected.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "What is our mother?" he replied scornfully. "Is she anything more than a coarse fishwife in silk with a gold chain?"

"Eilert!" I exclaimed in horror.

"As a matter of fact," he continued calmly, "her mother was actually bred in a fish shop, and her daughter, our mother, is only a fishwife in disguise with ormolu embellishments. What am I, I should like to know? Can't I bend a horseshoe in my hands? How could my sister fail to be fascinated by strong, coarse, powerful men?"

"But Dutti is not strong," I protested.

"No, but he has big limbs and is a brute at bottom," he replied. "That's the point!"

"Oh, you know everything!" she cried scornfully, and looked dreamily into the distance.

. . . . .

While writing the above it has occurred to me that the order of events may not be quite correct, and that it was Eilert's return to Ballum that brought me back to closer intercourse with my fellows.

Following a violent scene with his mother he had left school as a sixth-form boy, and stayed away for some time. After attending the art school at Düsseldorf he became dissatisfied and left, and, with very little money and a rucksack on his back, had gone in search of work all through Flanders and Holland, whence he had returned on a Dutch cargo-boat, working his way as an able seaman.

I remember that he was very depressed. He regretted having to come home again, and bewailed the fact that he would be deprived of teachers and models; but while he was glad that he had seen the masterpieces of his art he was also pleased to set eyes on the beauties of his native landscape once more. He was very friendly to me, and called me "little ensign"; and, though I remained a layman as far as his art was concerned, I felt that he had made great strides. He inveighed bitterly against Ballum and Ballum society, and especially against his mother and sister. He always referred to them as Sarah and Barbara Mumm, showing how far away he was from them, and declared that they were more sorry than pleased that he had come back.

When I urged him to try to be on better terms with his mother he asked what I meant. Was he to sit with her and Dutti Kohl and discuss mortgages and shares all day? "If you think I could do that," he said, "you can't know me! As for Barbara, she's not looking out, like a decent girl, for an honest, good-natured fellow, but for a man who will master her physically and buy her gold rings for her fingers and ears, and especially for her nose. What I should like would be for the pair of them to wake up one fine day to find themselves penniless!"

I started. I was so horrified by the idea that I could not grasp it. "Oh, Eilert," I exclaimed, "that would be terrible!" And I suggested that even if he could not feel like a son and a brother towards them he at least had Eva and me.

"Yes," he agreed, "and Uhle Monk! I don't think I should have come back unless I had known I was going to see her again."

I knew how good Uhle was to him and how much he stood in need of the comfort she gave him; but what he said pained me on Eva's account, and I protested that for one who, like himself, set so much store by "natural" people, I could not understand why he did not see that Eva and her mother were women after his own heart.

He nodded. "Yes," he said, "but deep down they are Philistines too, full of ideas of justice and uplift, and they set themselves up as judges because they don't know how much more there is in heaven and earth. But I do, little ensign!"

I wanted to argue the point, but just at that moment Dutti Kohl entered.

I had not seen him for months, and was astonished at his smart appearance. He was carrying an expensive umbrella and various parcels, and in his well-cut clothes and cloth spats he seemed to look cleaner and more wholesome. After greeting Eilert, he hugged me as usual. "I am always glad to see little Babendiek, Herr Mumm," he said. "We are old friends from Steenkarken, and I once stood by him when he was in great trouble."

I was not aware of his having stood by me, but he knew that I would not wish to discuss the matter. So I asked him coldly how he was.

Hugging me so tightly that I felt I was almost standing inside the huge circumference of his body, he replied that, seeing how seriously his tender conscience interfered with his business, he was as well as could be expected—though he had managed to bring back a few bottles of liqueur with him from Hamburg; and he begged Eilert to accept one.

I was surprised to see Eilert consent, but, as I afterwards discovered, Dutti Kohl was the only creature in this turbulent period of his career who showed any interest in his work and refrained from criticising his manner of life; for Eilert was like a wild deep torrent, constantly overflowing its banks. I cannot say this without sadness, seeing that to this day he has remained, both to Eva and myself, the dearest of memories, great sufferer that he was.

We sat down and drank. I took a glass too, the first in my life. But I felt I required support against Dutti's overwhelming smartness and assurance. He asked to see some sketches, and on being shown them uttered those meaningless platitudes which, as I afterwards learnt, are mere parrot-cries showing no real appreciation.

We left shortly afterwards, and Eilert accompanied us, but Dutti Kohl, pleading that he had some business to transact with Frau Mumm, tried, I feel convinced, to create an impression of familiarity and friendship by leaving the son for the mother.

She was sitting at the window in her fine black silk dress, with the gold chain glistening on her stately bosom. Greeting Dutti and me with cold condescension, she listened while

Dutti reported upon a little Stock Exchange deal he had done for her.

He told her he had bought certain shares, and turned the opportunity to account by again emphasizing his honesty and the difficulty his scruples gave him.

At that moment Barbara entered. Her little face was flushed from the sea breeze, and her eyes, usually so cold, sparkled with fire. She was evidently pleased to see us both, particularly Dutti. While she asked him all sorts of questions about Hamburg I noticed that she examined him closely from head to foot.

It was on this occasion, I believe, that Dutti mentioned a dancing-master who was coming to Ballum. At all events, that winter—the last I spent in Ballum, for I matriculated in the spring—was very gay; for the little town was full of lively young people, and the excitement reached its height when the dancing-master appeared.

He arrived in a blizzard on a bitterly cold day, and alighted from the train in a shabby dinner-jacket with his dirty violin case under one arm and a bundle under the other. They were his only possessions. The wind whistled, but he whistled more shrilly still. Stepping up to us, he told us that he had never finished his course as a student, that he was now a dancing-master, and went about all the year round in his dinner-jacket without an overcoat, because he liked it.

He thought dancing the most important thing in life, and had evidently made up his mind to convert Ballum to this view. In any case, a fortnight after his arrival he had played his cards so well that all the servants were dancing in the kitchens, the workmen in the workshops, and the children at the street corners, while many clubs and societies altered their rules to allow dances to be held in the evenings.

We sixth-form boys had succeeded in persuading the tall junior judge, who presided over the lower court, to be president of our dancing club, which we called the "Academic"; but, as a matter of fact, Eilert, Ernemann, and Dutti Kohl were its leading lights. Ernemann was good-looking and cheerful. He now wanted to be a singer, and meditated letting his hair grow long. Dutti was by far the smartest of us all. We sixth-form boys had stipulated that he should not be allowed to become a member. Eilert and Ernemann were different—but Dutti? Keeping a shop, as he did, what right had he to belong to the "Academic" dancing club? We argued the matter all through three recreations, and continued the debate by means of notes which we passed round the room. Then Eilert told me that both Barbara and Eva wanted Dutti to be a member. "You know, little ensign," he said, "that Barbara has a weakness for him; Eva only agrees with her out of kindness." And so the matter was settled. The tall junior judge was rather sarcastic, and said it was ridiculous for Dutti to come to the dances in his grey spats; but we sixth-form boys were impressed by his assurance, and by the fact that he often went to Hamburg, where he informed us that he mixed with the "best people." And as we had no idea what sort of people dealt in "Portugals" and "St Domingoes" we believed him.

Forming a group in a corner of the hall, we watched the dancing-master whirling about before us in his short black jacket, very much faded by wind and rain. How we despised him—him and his art! Besides, what did we care about dancing? We only hoped that dancing might bring us into closer contact with those mysterious, beautiful creatures who were facing us. We wanted to hold their hands, put our arms round their waists, look into their wonderful eyes, inhale the fragrance of their hair, and probe their souls—that was all!

The girls were all big healthy creatures, some of them beautiful. How everything about them vibrated with life! How they walked! How their eyes flashed! Eva and Barbara, then about eighteen, were in the first bloom of womanhood. Dutti and the junior judge glided forward to greet them. How daring! Eilert went up to a tall smart-looking country girl, who looked lovely when he made her blush, and her massive shoulders rose and fell as she laughed. Meanwhile I stood there pretending an assurance I was far from feeling.

In his falsetto voice the dancing-master announced the first dance, and the couples stepped forward. How they all looked at each other as they danced! I danced too. My partner was a tall business-man's daughter, who had the reputation of being a blue-stocking. I discussed higher education for women with her. But I was not really attending. I was watching the prettiest girls—Barbara and Eva. I tried to catch the latter's eye, and was thrilled when she called me "little ensign" as she whirled past. Putting her arm in mine during an interval, she told me that I ought to keep my left shoulder a little bit lower when I was dancing, and I showed so much zeal in obeying her that I saw her smile. Somehow, I don't know why, I felt that I was still only a boy and she was a woman, and that increased my awkwardness.

I accompanied my partner home, still discussing higher education. I could see the other couples about me, Eva keeping close to Eilert. I knew them too well not to recognize them in spite of the darkness.

Soon after Christmas, just before the last dance of the season, I saw a tall, finely-set-up young man approaching me, whom I did not recognize until I saw him suddenly draw himself up as a couple of little schoolgirls passed. Remembering who it was that did this, I dashed towards him in great excitement, crying, "Hullo, Fritz Hellebeck!"

"Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed in the same old pleasant patronizing tones. "Babendiek! I've been on the look out for you."

In a moment I was his slave again. Military life had broadened him, and he was now as fine a specimen of manhood as I had ever seen. I told him how glad I was to see him, and asked how long he was staying.

He said he was in a grain business in Ballum, and would be staying a few months. The farm was not enough; he intended to deal in grain as well. He told me that his mother, Sören, Hans, and Almut were all quite well and had sent me their greetings.

"And is Almut happy?" I asked.

He laughed self-complacently. "I think so," he replied. "She has reason to be."

I agreed most emphatically.

He said they were to be married in a year, when Almut would be eighteen, but that he already had the management of her property. Then he asked me who were the "best" people in Ballum, as he would like to meet them.

I knew his habit of looking out for money, and measuring everybody and everything by that standard, but I could not help being astonished, now that I was a little bit older, at the barefaced way he spoke about it. However, I told him proudly that the richest was my aunt, Frau Mumm, but that the best was Auntie Lena, who had generously taken me under her roof, and I proposed that we should go to her at once.

We found Auntie Lena sitting at the table in her great armchair, and, strange to say, she was alone. I wondered whether she would overpower him as she did every one else; and, indeed, she opened the conversation in her usual high-handed way. "We know all about you, dear Hellebeck," she said, "from Holler, so it only remains to ask what has brought you here. People come to Ballum either for cattle, or to soak themselves in grog, or else . . ."

He told her, and asked her all kinds of questions about the town, and spoke with such deference and assurance that Auntie Lena grew noticeably humbler. She listened and grew cautious, and gave him more information than he gave her.

During their conversation Ernemann entered. Fritz seemed to see at once how much he could get out of the mother through the son. At any rate, after asking Ernemann what he would like to be, he suggested that he should go into business, and drew a glowing picture of the prospects for one with Ernemann's obvious gifts.

Auntie Lena smiled. Neither she nor her favourite child said much, but I saw how their heads swam with the visions that filled them. And Hellebeck saw it too. He felt the blind devotion of the mother and the fantastic vanity of the son. Whereupon, with a kindly smile, he suggested that Ernemann might join him.

How delighted they both were! What an opportunity for trying a job under a friend just for fun, to see whether one liked it or not, with the chance of getting out of it without disgrace if one did not!

Fritz Hellebeck knew that he had carried all before him, and we went on together to Frau Mumm's.

She, too, was alone. Sitting in her customary state over her accounts, she greeted me coldly, as usual, and hardly raised her head to my friend.

But Fritz only had to mention that he and his mother were obliged to sit together for hours over the accounts dealing with their large farm, their timber transactions, and above all their investments, and Sarah Mumm understood.

Oh, he knew how to deal with her, and was as different as chalk from cheese to the Fritz he had been a few minutes previously. He spoke with a melancholy expression about the burdens of wealth, and of the ignorance and overweening arrogance of poverty.

"People won't think," said Sarah Mumm.

"Exactly, dear lady," he replied. "We who have been born to wealth know how painfully every penny has been earned and should be husbanded; but to lesser people it is easily earned, easily spurned."

"Precisely!" she exclaimed, "at least, I suppose it is so; for I could not, for the life of me, put myself in the position of a poor woman. But they do indeed seem to live from hand to mouth."

I ventured to hint discreetly that their wages were often insufficient to last longer than a day.

She cast a pitying look at me. I blushed, and was glad when Hellebeck remarked: "My dear Babendiek, your troubles so far have been confined to administering your weekly pocket-money!"

In the hall Barbara came up to us with her long brisk strides, and I introduced Fritz. On the way upstairs he told me that he liked my aunt immensely, and Barbara even more, and asked me again whether they were really the richest people in the town.

I replied that as far as I knew they were.

Then he referred to Eilert, and said I had led him to believe he was a doubtful character. I replied that he was the best fellow in the world.

But he said he thought artist chaps like him were always a bit of an incubus, and reminded me how much better off Almut was in this respect, for, unlike my beautiful cousin Barbara, she had no encumbrances.

Seeing my astonishment, he explained that for anyone who had to manage a large property such considerations were necessary. "What a pity it is," he added, with a strange smile, "that one cannot marry two rich girls at once!"

About a week later we had our last dance, and Almut came to Ballum for the occasion.

When Ernemann and I went upstairs to look at the girls' dresses we found they were not quite ready, so we stopped and talked to them for a bit. Barbara happened to make a remark about me which Eva thought disparaging, so turning to me, with her evening dress on her arm, Eva exclaimed consolingly, "Oh, Holler!" and threw her bare arms round my neck and kissed me.

I was extremely embarrassed. I was too young and too modest to conclude from Eva's behaviour that she was physically attracted by me, but the little scene stirred me for some time, and whenever I thought of it I was filled with mingled feelings of unspeakable bliss and vague distress.

I danced only once with Eva and Almut that night, for not only was I kept busy with the blue-stocking, but I felt I must leave them to their sweethearts. The junior judge and Dutti danced with Barbara at first, but when Fritz appeared upon the scene he won an easy victory over both and neglected Almut.

I thought she must feel he was neglecting her, but she was a child at heart, despite her eighteen years, and her great handsome lover had entirely failed to awaken her more serious side. When I was dancing with her I inquired after Hans, and saw at once from the way her face lit up that the wonderful attachment was as strong as ever.

At about eleven o'clock Eilert turned up, somewhat the worse for drink, and became abusive and pugnacious, declaring that the "louts" who had been dancing with his sister were all beneath her.

None of the fellows dared approach him, and the dancing-master, who tripped up to him with his fiddle in his hand, was brushed aside like straw. At last I summoned up all my courage, and going up to him said: "Eilert, you may be right, but at the moment you are making a lot of good people feel very unhappy."

That did the trick! I had appealed to his fundamental good-nature.

Dancing was resumed, but all the enthusiasm had vanished, and we finished earlier than we had intended. As I was waiting for my partner outside, who should appear but Dutti Kohl! Pressing me to his side as usual, he led me along the avenue of limes and poured out his feelings about Barbara's grace and beauty.

I was annoyed, but told him scornfully to have a shot at her.

Hugging me more tightly than ever, he replied that it was a very ticklish business, and he would have to go carefully. "For what am I?" he cried, "and what is she? No, the two sides don't balance yet, and I must do a great deal more reckoning yet. You see," he added, "if I am to win her, I must have——" and he moved his fingers as if he were counting money.

I tried to tear myself away, but he dragged me on, and pointed at something with his finger. I looked, and saw, in a side alley leading to my aunt's house, Barbara and Fritz kissing and cuddling. Disturbed by our appearance, they parted, and Fritz ran into the street. But Dutti did not seem to be jealous or distressed. He merely remarked that Barbara would have many such experiences before she had done.

Feeling tired, I tore myself away at last, and ran towards home. But except for the Kirchenstrasse, which was deserted, there seemed to be couples everywhere, and suddenly I came upon Eva and Eilert. Although he was drunk, he had waited for her, and she was standing in an attitude of complete surrender in his arms, her beautiful head thrown back, allowing him to shower his wild kisses upon her. I could hear her crying; I could feel how utterly wretched she was. Yet she accepted his love!

Except for Bothilde, I had never seen love like this. And it was Eva—Eva, the saint I adored!

CHAPTER XIII

The Sky is Overcast

On the following morning, after Eva and I had seen Almut off on the ferry, and entrusted her with all kinds of messages for everybody at Buchholz, particularly Hans, I turned to Eva and said: "Well, did I exaggerate when I said that she was the prettiest, best, and happiest little thing in all Holstein?"

As Eva did not answer, I looked up and saw that she was crying. "You're miserable about Eilert," I said, feeling I had been tactless. Again she did not answer, and I waxed eloquent in defence of Eilert.

She replied that at times she gave up all hope of his ever becoming a rational and settled member of society.

I wondered whether I was justified in urging her to stick to him, but I told her that I felt sure that some day he would settle down, and drew a glowing picture of their future. I believed it all because I loved them both.

"And keep Uhle Monk with us?" she cried bitterly. "Or some other slut from the streets? He has a weakness for guttersnipes!"

I assured her that he would get over that.

"What's bred in the bone comes out in the flesh," she said, "and only grows stronger with time. Oh, Holler, if only I had a sweetheart like you!"

I protested that she did not know me, that Ballum people had only seen me on my best behaviour, because I felt myself under an obligation to them.

She laid a hand on my arm and shook me. "Shall I tell you what I think?" she said with smiling emphasis. "I think there is something you do hide, and that is fire. But then your fire will always be bright and benevolent."

On our way home, as we passed a tavern frequented by fisherfolk and harbour loafers I could hear Eilert's voice above the rest of the din inside, but hoped she did not notice it.

In the sitting-room at home we found Auntie Lena installed in her great armchair, with Ernemann perched on the arm, discussing the plans for his start as a business man in Hellebeck's office. They were both convinced that business was the best possible career for a man of his gifts.

"It's so strange," Auntie Lena was saying, "that we hadn't thought of this all along. For, after all, we wanted something where there was full scope for Ernemann's gifts. He will visit the different countries and turn his versatility to account everywhere. For instance, in one place he will find the people keen on music, in another keen on the theatre, and in another keen on wood-carving. What do you say, Holler? You are so clever that you can almost hear the grass grow! Tell us where and how his gifts will shine best!"

I said that human nature was much the same in every country, and that he would find people who would like something or other about him wherever he went.

But this did not fit in with my aunt's picture. Perhaps I was wrong to put it so clearly. "That's gibberish, my dear boy!" she said, looking scornfully at me.

"The main thing for a business man," I said with a smile, "is to be able to see men and things in their true light, value them intelligently, and know how to turn them to his own advantage."

"Exactly!" she cried triumphantly, "and that's precisely Ernemann's *forte*! You know very well how he turns people and things to his own account! Don't you remember, Eva, when he was only six, how he got all the children of the place into the scullery and made them act with him?"

I wanted to say that this was not exactly what I meant, but she was so confident and happy that she gave me no opportunity, and began to attack me, as she loved to do. I believe something in my face provoked her, or was it only her love for me?

"No," she said, "I am not anxious about Ernemann. But what will become of you, Heaven alone knows! What with your auspicious beginnings—that famous gold coin!—and all your distinguished friends, Engel Tiedje, Balle, the baker, your cattle-market and ferry acquaintances, and, above all, Dutti Kohl! They'll all want you to be one of them. But I can see you wavering between Dutti's glassware business and his bank."

"You've forgotten the most important friend of all," I replied with a smile, "whose calling I would adopt if I had the means to study."

She suddenly grew anxious, and with some emotion warned me not to aim too high.

I replied that I had no wish to do that, though I had thought of studying theology and German archæology, into which Uncle Gosch had initiated me so well. "If Engel Tiedje can keep me at the University long enough, of course," I added.

Outside Eva came to me crying and in great distress. "Oh, please, Holler," she begged, "go to that inn on the harbour and persuade Eilert to leave it!"

I said I had already made up my mind to do so, and set off at once.

He had just then fallen into a habit, which he kept up till his dying day, of periodically throwing down all the tools of his art and spending a week or so haunting public-houses. And at such times he was generally wild or maudlin with drink.

In the past I had been accustomed to deal with the people he frequented, but as a sixth-form boy I seemed to have become somewhat of a scholar, and had lost much of my ease of manner with simple folk. Moreover, I knew I had a delicate task before me. I accordingly entered the large low-ceilinged taproom rather timidly. It was full of fishermen and cattle-dealers in their working clothes, all more or less drunk and singing drinking-songs. At the far end of the room sat Balle, with his dirty yellow cap pulled down over his red-gold fringe, leading the music and beating time on the head of a sleeping drover. Behind the latter a red calf was tethered. I made my way up to Balle and showed I was pleased to see him; but, without interrupting his song, he pushed me down into a chair beside him. Then with his drover's stick he began to belabour the sleeping man's head more vigorously than ever.

I could see Eilert in a recess by the window, with a steaming glass of grog beside him, feverishly sketching in a book he held between his knees. He was quite drunk. He shouted to me to keep still, as my milky white face provided a good note in the prevailing gloom. Meanwhile Balle was hitting the sleeping man's head ever harder and harder, till at last he woke up, and with besotted, drunken eyes looked round for his calf, but could not see it.

Balle leant forward. "My friend, your calf has been transformed!" he said in his usual grandfatherly tones.

"Trans—what?" cried the man. "Where is it then?"

"It has been transformed into this young man."

He stared at me open-mouthed, and everybody roared with laughter and shouted, "Yes, that's right! That's your calf, sitting in that chair!"

"Impossible!" cried the man.

"Why impossible?" they all exclaimed. "It's sitting there in front of you, and you say it's impossible!"

"And he's a prince," continued Balle. "One of the *Pöseldorfern*!"

The man stared at me once more, and then, turning to the others, he burst into tears, exclaiming, "My Gawd! What's to become of my wife and kids now! Speak, man, for Gawd's sake! Are you a prince?"

Everybody shouted and laughed loud enough to shatter the window-panes. I felt unequal to the situation. Eilert noticed it and called to me to keep still. Hands were laid upon me to keep me in my place, and the host and his wife appeared in the shadowy background. But at last, unable to bear it any longer, I showed the man the calf, which was lying down on the floor behind him, and went over to Eilert.

He was still drawing feverishly, and laughing in a sinister way to himself. "Your friend Hellebeck," he said, "is a polished money-box! Loathsome!" I was somewhat taken aback. But I said nothing, as I wanted to take him away. At last the sky clouded over, and the room grew so dark that he could no longer see to draw. All the rest were snoring in their seats, and he got up to go.

I was afraid he might enter another public-house, but he was too busy inveighing against Ballum and his mother, and I led him home.

Upstairs in his room he continued railing against the world in general, as he set to work to colour the picture he had just drawn of the calf scene; and presently he spoke about Eva. She too, he said, was one of the Philistines, who were the curse of the world. Whereupon, referring to Uhle Monk, he pulled a large picture from his cupboard, and said: "There—there's a human being for you!"

I immediately recognized a picture of Uhle, stripped to the waist, washing herself at a tub.

I did not blame him. I was never able to blame him as long as he lived, for this side of him was an inextricable part of the best that was in him. And indeed I could not help admiring the power with which he had portrayed the whole soul of the girl.

I did not suspect at that moment that I was related to him in more than blood, and that I too was an artist. But when I did become aware of it I was thankful to find that by the grace of God mine was a steadier, quieter, and more docile Muse.

I implored him not to show the picture to anyone, and inquired anxiously whether he had already done so.

He replied, as he put it away, that that fool of a dancing-master had seen it.

"If people get to know about that picture——" I began anxiously.

He made an impatient gesture and looked angrily at me, almost as though he hated me. I gathered that he wanted me to go; but when he gazed into my eyes and saw in them the affection I bore him he let his hand drop in despair.

Nevertheless I thought it best to go.

On the way I met Uhle on the stairs. As I passed her I felt an impulse to beg her to leave the house and remove the danger threatening him. But I refrained. After all, I knew that his greatest danger lay in himself and not in other people. And so I went down.

On the way home I called at Dutti's, and was told that he and the dancing-master were up in Dutti's room, but would soon be down. So I remained standing at the counter, where old Kohl was trying to persuade a young peasant to buy some shares.

When the transaction was ended and the peasant had gone, Kohl turned sadly to me and shrugged his shoulders. "People ought not to buy so much, Herr Babendiek," he said, "and least of all the things that are offered them. You saw that peasant? What does he want with stocks and shares? Does a rational man ever buy anything he doesn't understand? More education! That's what's wanted—more education!"

I felt inclined to ask him why, if he held such views, he kept all those shoddy goods in his window to deceive people with; but at that moment Dutti and the dancing-master entered, and the conversation immediately turned on the Mumms.

Old Kohl asked me what the relationship was between mother and son.

As I had now become much more suspicious and cautious, I replied that their natures were different.

Dutti hugged me—I might even say he absorbed me into himself. "And do you know, little Babendiek, which nature I prefer?" he said with a laugh.

I guessed it must be the mother's.

"Quite right!" he cried, hugging me more tightly. "Dutti Kohl votes for Ma!"

I objected, though without any sign of reproach, that he was always very friendly with Eilert.

"And why not?" he exclaimed. "How could your poor friend do any business if he were not friendly to every one? But Eilert's clever mother will soon be very unfriendly to her son and turn him out neck and crop!"

"With a crash that will be audible for miles!" added the dancing-master.

"I ought really to be very angry with you, little Babendiek," said Dutti, "for bringing Hellebeck to Ballum."

I retorted that he had come to Ballum on business.

"What a baby you are!" he replied. "That bullfinch has as much business in its beak as Hellebeck has in his whole body. He never came here for any business; he only came out of vanity and to have some fun, and he is going to stay another month, because every evening when it is dark he goes with Barbara on to the heath."

"Oh," interposed the dancing-master, "that'll soon stop after the crash. The moment Hellebeck sees what sort of a brother Barbara has he'll wind up his business here and go."

I reminded them that Hellebeck was engaged.

Dutti Kohl laughed. "Yes, I know," he cried. "And he's sticking to the girl for her meadows. So there's no real danger. But even so I don't like it. You know I love Barbara!" And he crushed me against him. "But I bet you," he added, "that when your peacock sees the brother take flight he'll follow suit. Ha, ha! He's for the whitest waistcoat every time!"

I asked the dancing-master whether he was going to leave Ballum too, but he replied that he intended to stop on for the time being. So I abandoned the idea of speaking to him about the dangerous picture that day, and left.

. . . . .

I shall say nothing about the leaving examination, which I passed a fortnight after this conversation, or of how Uncle Gosch greeted me as his young "comrade in arms" against Sven Modersohn, his Copenhagen opponent on the subject of Pytheas. Suffice it to say that when I got home Auntie Lena, convinced that I would be bursting with conceit, began by taking me severely to task; but she soon grew sentimental and tearful, saying that it had indeed been a stroke of good fortune both for herself and her family that the storm wind of Stormfeld had wafted me and my gold coin from the Bohnsacks' farm into her arms. Neither shall I enter into the details of how Eva as soon as she heard my voice dashed downstairs and embraced me, weeping for joy. For I have matters of greater moment to describe. I must just mention, however, that the desk in my room was decorated with flowers, and that on it was a letter from Engel Tiedje containing five hundred marks, for my "first term," as he vaguely put it.

On the following morning I happened to come across Eilert Mumm near the harbour, and he persuaded me to cross the river with him and go to the sheep farm. Looking upon the wonderful landscape about us, as we stood at the great door of the farm, he remarked: "How fine it would be if no human justice had ever appeared to mar the vast eternal justice of nature!" Meanwhile his little eyes were surveying the scene, and I gathered from the sound of his voice that he was composing a picture.

Round the corner of the building we came across the two shepherds, apricating under the wall of the farm, sheltered from the wind. And I stopped to speak to them, while Eilert went inside.

The only explanation they offered for being where they were was to point back at the house with their thumbs and mutter, "She!"

Gathering that they meant Uhle Monk, I replied that although she was a very active woman, she was also exceedingly good-natured, whereupon one of them pointed to a ewe, implying that she was as good-natured as that animal.

Inside the house I found Uhle Monk and another hefty young woman engaged in a sort of spring-cleaning, Uhle having taken the day off to come and help.

Eilert loved the low-ceilinged room. He was sitting by the window drinking in the sight, and when he saw me he pointed to the strange girl. "Look at that animal!" he said. "But who is she?"

I seemed to know the great strong girl, and all of a sudden I remembered who she was. "Why," I exclaimed, "you are my old friend Bothilde, Balle Bohnsack's sister, and I was your little farm-hand!"

She recognized me now, and wrung my hand heartily, saying she knew I was in Ballum, and had heard of me from time to time. She still spoke in the same sleepy voice.

Apparently she was related to the two shepherds, and explained that she came every year to help Uhle with the spring-cleaning. "But they are good for nothing," she declared. "They groan and pant so that we prefer even to fetch the water ourselves."

I turned to Eilert, who was devouring her with his eyes. At last he went up to her, and in a natural matter-of-fact tone of voice, that might well have given offence, said: "You are the loveliest creature I have seen for a long time," and continued to stare at her.

She blushed vividly, and, coming to her rescue, I asked her whether she was still good friends with Dieter Blank.

She replied that she was, and explained that he was too frivolous a man for marriage.

"And so your life is being wasted . . ." I exclaimed. I meant to say her dear precious life, but I hope she saw from my expression all the love and gratitude she inspired in me.

We exchanged reminiscences for a while, and Eilert asked her about her people and her farm.

On the way home he was much more lively. The sight of Bothilde had been the crowning joy to his morning's feast among the glorious scenes of nature.

He questioned me about my experiences at the Bohnsacks' farm, and thought the adventure with Bothilde in the ditch simply wonderful. "Don't you see how wonderful it was?" he cried, shaking me.

I was only nineteen and had had no experience. I still adored Eva and Almut, but that was all I knew about such things. Then suddenly I remembered something I had seen. I saw Eva in Eilert's arms, with her dear head thrown back, receiving his kisses, and I shuddered and turned my face away from him.

On the next day the last winter function held by the "best" people of Ballum took place. It was held at the Mumms' in honour of Barbara's nineteenth birthday. At first the evening was not very different from the others we had spent in that house. The table was lighted by a row of old silver candlesticks, placed between the decanters of wine, and three huge joints of roast beef, from an ox specially killed on one of Frau Mumm's farms, had been provided for the feast. Councillor Jebsen, a fine old man, sat in front of the largest but one of these joints, and beside him were the Dean, the judicial authorities, the leading wine-merchant, and everybody of note.

After the soup the old councillor, turning first red and then white, and twisting his table-napkin about in his hands, at last rose and proposed Frau Mumm's health on the old familiar lines, dropping into Low German now and again as he proceeded, and chaffing her good-humouredly, if a little coarsely, about everything she possessed, from her farms to her two children, Eilert and Barbara. She looked on with a gratified smile as he spoke, letting the fine gold chain about her neck glide glittering through her none too beautiful fingers. And when he referred to her able management of her affairs, and told everybody what a clever woman she was, she beamed with delight. He then touched lightly on Eilert's artistic exploits, as a sort of youthful measles, and vowed that in ten years' time the lad would be the best judge of cattle in all Ballum. As for Barbara—why, she could choose any man she liked—himself, for instance. (Roars of laughter.) Whereupon he shook hands with his hostess, while everybody turned to their respective partners, clinked glasses, smiled and cheered.

They were all blind. They were not insincere, but totally blind. I know now that the only eyes that were open at that table were those of the son of the house.

Even Auntie Lena was blind. I watched her, sitting there with her long handsome nose, full of grave attention, and satisfied with God and man. As Eilert's godmother she was quite ready to believe that he would be back among the oxen some day. Allowing the wine to rock her indolently into dreamland amid the smiles and jokes of the company, she began to flirt with the junior judge, although there were three couples dividing them. Then turning to the old councillor, and making a dead set at him, she accused him of repeating the same old speech over and over again, and they proceeded to bicker, while the whole company laughed and cheered. When the crackers were handed round, and she put on a sort of Polish cap that suited her admirably, she looked, with her large nose, her fine bold eyebrows, and her pretty wavy hair, rather like a beautiful and dignified country vicar's wife, with a touch of the eighteenth-century duchess about her. And she reigned supreme.

Uncle Gosch took no part in the proceedings. Inspired by the one glass of wine he had drunk, he sat quietly there, occasionally taking a slip of paper from his pocket and surreptitiously scribbling something on it. He was absorbed in Pytheas, and was preparing for his final duel with Sven Modersohn.

The lower end of the table was occupied by all of us younger folk. Eva and Barbara were laughing at the junior judge's efforts in the English language, while Dutti sat silently listening. He openly confessed to Barbara that he did not know a word of English, but I felt certain from the look in his eyes that he intended starting there and then to learn it. Eilert sat lazily lolling and talking about Holland. He drank a good deal of red wine, and it made his eyes shine when he spoke of wild and passionate freedom. Ernemann was talking to the dancing-master, who intended leaving Ballum the next day. We had all come to the conclusion that he was a gas-bag and a braggart, though we had silently made up our minds to put up with him to the end. Ernemann, at any rate, still believed in him, and was evidently deliberating whether he would not adopt his profession. The dancing-master was looking a little bit uneasy. Presently he got up and went into the hall, and we all thought he only wanted to speak to the two musicians, who had already taken up their position on the stairs; but when he returned he looked more agitated than ever.

Uhle tripped lightly round the table, waiting on the guests with the help of two other maids. She looked after everything, even the wine-glass which Auntie Lena in her excitement almost upset; but managed all the same to steal an occasional neutral glance at Eilert. His robust nature, however, claimed greater freedom than others, and he smiled naturally back at her, regardless of where he was.

At last amid the general hubbub of voices the whole company rose. All their faces were animated and full of life. Peals of laughter rang out, and the leading couple threw open the double doors to the hall.

As usual on such festive occasions, the hall was decorated with garlands of oak-leaves, which hung from the wrought iron chandelier to the tops of the old pictures. And seeing the latter brightly illumined, people looked up at them. Some of them even looked beyond, because an unaccustomed blaze of colour attracted their eyes.

And lo, between the six large pictures of Amsterdam, there were two new pictures, one representing a wild scene in a drinking booth, and the other the portrait of Uhle which Eilert had shown me, in all its crude and daring colours, with her round naked shoulders, ugly face and all. It was a picture full to the brim with exuberant life. But in the eyes of that company it was an impossible, outrageous picture, a picture that killed their enjoyment.

A terrified scream from Sarah Mumm or a curse from Eilert gave the signal, and in a moment nine-tenths of those present, led by Councillor Jebsen, silently pressed Frau Mumm's hand, and, fetching their things, left the house. Their loyalty and friendship did not extend beyond the red wine, the formal toast, and the smiles that had followed. They knew no better, and could not act otherwise. They could not stomach that picture and the cries it had provoked from mother and son. All they could do was to leave.

With a roar of rage Eilert called out for the dancing-master. But he too had gone. Indeed, he had been the first to go. Dutti Kohl cast a glance of deepest sympathy at Sarah Mumm and said a kind word to Barbara, and then he also took his leave. He was well aware that if anything really human happened it must inevitably put an end to a social function, and accordingly left those who were immediately concerned to themselves.

Sarah Mumm was standing quivering with rage at the door of the dining-room. "It's not only this," she cried, pointing to the picture, "but for years you have disgraced us with your rotten behaviour, your drunkenness, and your endless indiscretions. You shall go this very night, and not wait till the morning!"

"To-morrow morning," he replied, coldly and calmly, "to Rotterdam. I have to pack my things yet."

Auntie Lena had dropped into a chair looking utterly wretched. "It is hard on the relatives!" she sighed.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Sarah Mumm.

Auntie Lena settled herself more comfortably. "Don't imagine I'm going to take orders from you, Sarah!" she replied, raising her voice. "But let me tell you this much—you've been too stuck up all this time, that's what you've been! Too stuck up to go to his room to see what was going on under your own roof!"

With his usual frankness Eilert exclaimed with bitter scorn: "Auntie Lena, don't quarrel! Neither you nor my mother know anything about your own children. What do you know about the doings of your own son and daughter?" Then, pointing to his mother, he added: "And do you suppose she knows what her daughter does when she goes on the heath with the junior judge one day and Tom, Dick, or Harry the next? You are a couple of blind hens, that's all you are!"

"You are as stuck up as your mother, my dear boy," Auntie Lena replied in a very loud voice, her eyebrows raised as high as they would go, "and in front of those pictures too, which are really shocking! I don't mind saying so!"

"But are they good pictures?" Eilert inquired scornfully. "That is the only question—are the pictures themselves good?"

"I think they're good," Auntie Lena replied; "at least that one of Uhle is. But really, Eilert, she might have had something more on! Surely you might have caught her five minutes earlier!"

"I hope you're going to take her with you," said his mother. "She shan't stay another minute in my house!"

Auntie Lena protested. "Uhle Monk has her good points," she pleaded. "I've never seen anyone so quick at washing, and when you had that attack of inflammation of the lungs she had a big dinner on the fire and was in the middle of spring-cleaning, and yet she saw to you and did everything herself. I've never seen anything like it. Such people are always a little hot-blooded. Mad on washing, mad on men! You ought to have known that yourself!"

"Thank you, Auntie Lena," said Eilert. "At least you have a glimmer of understanding!"

"Yes, that's all very well," Auntie Lena continued, "but there must be some sort of order in life. You must know that, Eilert; we must have order!"

"Oh, that'll do!" cried Sarah Mumm, "he's utterly demoralized!"

All his hatred of his antithesis flared up in Eilert's scornful retort. "What?" he cried. "We—demoralized? No!—you! You with your thick gold chain hiding a multitude of social hypocrisies. You are deceit incarnate. I am a human being. I am fire and blood through thick and thin!"

Barbara, who had intended to retire silently to her room, was still standing on the first step of the stairs. She was, as usual, quite cool. "Yes, Eilert," she said, "that's exactly what you are; you and your goings on have ruined our whole social position. That's what you've done!"

"You need not be afraid, my dear sister," he replied bitterly. "If I were taking your money away with me I should certainly be ruining your social position. But I am going; and you'll see, far from doing you any harm, it will be to your advantage. After this the junior judge and Dutti Kohl will be all the keener on you and your money!"

"It's just like you to mention names!" she retorted. "You always were vulgar, ill-bred, and coarse!"

"Now that's going a bit too far!" interposed Auntie Lena in her deepest tones. "Eilert is not ill-bred, vulgar, and coarse. And I can't help it, I shall go on loving him as I have always loved him." Whereupon, catching sight of Eva, she added: "Oh, there you are, Eva! I thought you had gone home. Why, you're crying—and no wonder!"

Eva had her hat and coat on. She was pale and breathing heavily.

Eilert wanted to say something to her, but she forestalled him. "Don't say anything, Eilert," she pleaded in simple matter-of-fact tones. "I know you can't be different. But I can't be different either; it's my nature. Until now nothing frightened me. But I see now that there would be no peace and order in my life, and I could not bear that."

He went up to her and took her hand. "I understand," he said. "I am sorry, Eva." He too was pale now, and perfectly sober.

"You need not be sorry, Eilert," she replied. "I have been very happy at times, and I don't think any the less of you because of this. I only think less of myself, because I don't feel strong enough to go with you and help you all I can. But I wish you the best of luck." She was pale as death, and the hand she gave him trembled. But she was brave and did not break down.

"Wait a moment, Eva," said Auntie Lena. "I'll go with you. Good luck, dear Eilert! May God be with you wherever you go, however strange your path. . . ."

"Why don't you say 'dirty' and have done with it?" he exclaimed with proud disdain. "I should not be angry. Words mean so little! What do 'dirty' and 'evil' mean?"

"All right, Eilert dear," she replied. "You see neither Eva nor I think any the less of you. . . . And now go to your room! . . . But what can I say to you, Sarah?"

"I'm all right, thank you. I can manage," replied Sarah Mumm. "I don't want your help!"

"Indeed!" cried Auntie Lena. "Well, I don't believe it. As far as I can remember, you have never been able to manage—either in the case of your husband or of——"

"Lena, my dear," interposed Uncle Gosch, "you must not say such things!"

"You may be right for once, Gosch," she exclaimed. "But as for you, Sarah, why can't you love your children as they are?" Then suddenly turning to me, her great expressive eyes brimful of tears, she said: "You think, Holler, that I have no qualms about Ernemann! . . . You stuck-up booby, you! . . . You don't know how worried I am about him. But I dread the consequences of his soft and sensitive nature—that's why I am lenient with him. You don't understand!"

Overcome by her tears, I rushed to her side. "Oh, Auntie Lena," I exclaimed, full of pity, "but we do understand! And you are right—right in everything!"

"Ah!" she exclaimed impulsively, "you are all good for nothing, the whole lot of you! You are always against us two!"

Barbara had gone up to her room. Eilert was standing at the foot of the stairs, and going up to him I shook his hand and begged him not to forget me. Then bowing gravely to my aunt I followed Auntie Lena out.

When we were outside she said that as I had always been Eilert's friend she felt sure he would like to see me now and have my help.

So I bade her good-night and kissed her tearfully—I had never loved her more than I did that night—and, deeply moved, I went back into the house by the servants' entrance. Uhle was standing in the kitchen, wrapped in a great cloak, with her belongings packed at her side. I told her I wanted to go to Eilert and offer to help him. But she said that he would prefer to be alone, though he would like me to go with him to Hamburg in the morning. Apparently he wanted to get to Holland.

"You see," she said, "he'll come back penniless, as he did the last time, without a whole shirt to his back." She herself was going to look for another place.

"But you knew, didn't you," I asked gently, "that he was in love with Eva?"

"Yes," she replied, looking inquiringly at me.

I felt the fundamental primitiveness of her nature. "So you love him very much!" I said, full of pity for her.

"Oh, Twiddlums!" she cried, "I'd rather die with him than sleep in a bed of gold with a prince!"

CHAPTER XIV

Love

I SPENT two years in Munich, living very modestly in an attic and studying German archæology with great zeal. Every month I received a letter from Engel Tiedje giving me all kinds of news about the forge, and enclosing as much money as he could afford. Auntie Lena was not fond of writing. Having spoken Danish a good deal as a child, she was not sure of herself, and Eva wrote saying that her mother had told her she could imagine me smiling over the mistakes in her letters, and that she had had enough of my superior smiles at home. So it was Eva who gave me all the news, and thus I learnt that Ernemann had joined Fritz Hellebeck in Buchholz and was very happy, although his mother was broken-hearted at parting with him. Eva's letters always contained a note from Uncle Gosch, telling me how his controversy with Sven Modersohn about Pytheas was progressing, and he occasionally even asked me a question about a book or a quotation bearing on the subject.

At the end of the second year I detected a note of depression in Engel's letters. The old account-book was evidently in a bit of a muddle, as for the first time I received a letter containing no money and couched in the gloomiest terms. So I was forced to conclude that there must be something wrong with the income derived from the forge and my little inheritance, and decided, for the time being at all events, to give up my studies. I discussed the matter with a friend I had made, the son of a small newspaper editor in Altona.

A few weeks later, when I was coming to the end of my money, my friend suggested that I should go to his father for a year, to take the place of the feuilleton-writer, who had fallen ill. It would be only a half-time job, and I would be able to work at the museum on a thesis for my doctor's degree. I accepted the offer, and selling my small collection of books and knick-knacks, in order to meet my travelling expenses, I set out on my journey north.

I went straight to Altona, and found myself, with the single trunk holding all my belongings, in the station from which, two years previously, I had taken my first plunge into the world.

Though it had seen its best days, the suit I was wearing was a good one, and, probably out of vanity, I had put on a rough grey woollen hat which I imagined savoured of the Bavarian highlands. I was then twenty-two.

As I walked up and down, watching what was going on, I saw standing by a board bearing a list of the stations a man of about twenty-six, whose appearance interested me. He was simply and neatly dressed in a dark suit, and the tab of his coat was sticking out from the back of his collar. His black hat, which was too large for his head, was pulled down almost over his eyes, and he was looking anxiously in one direction. Then, suddenly raising his huge hat, he passed his hand impatiently through his dark unruly locks. It was then that I recognized him.

Pleased to see him so well dressed, I watched him for a bit, and then went up and accosted him. "How do you do, Paul Sooth!" I exclaimed.

He was beside himself with joy, and, raising his huge hat again, he finally jammed it down on his head so as almost to cover his eyes, and declared that meeting me like that was the biggest surprise he could have had.

As we made our way to the Town Hall and the Königstrasse, he asked me all kinds of questions, and I told him everything that had happened since I had last seen him.

He informed me that my uncle had married the fat "treacle-barrel" after all, because he imagined she had no children and was too old to have any then. But immediately after the wedding two illegitimate daughters, whose existence she had taken care to conceal, had appeared on the scene.

When I asked him how he was getting on I was not surprised that he should mention only his brothers and sisters. He was pleased to find I had remembered their names, and heaved a sigh of relief when he told me that they were now all out of the hands of the peasants except the youngest, whom he could not yet afford to apprentice to any trade.

As for himself, after serving his apprenticeship as a cobbler under my uncle, he had become apprenticed to a pastry-cook, but had left him on discovering his true vocation as a magistrate's clerk; and, pointing to the Town Hall as we passed, he showed me the two windows of his office.

As we walked along I noticed that he still searched the ground in all directions, as he had been in the habit of doing in the past, hoping to pick up something valuable for one of his brothers or sisters.

I asked him to help me to find lodgings, and he said there might be something close to his own quarters. Presently we reached an old-fashioned house, in the narrow hall of which I saw a rather tall, thin, sour-looking woman, and he introduced her to me as Frau Eckmüller, his landlady.

Frau Eckmüller was not exactly cordial. She told him that although he had lived under her roof for nearly two years he had apparently not yet learnt that he could not burst into the house at all hours of the day.

Sooth, pleading that his unexpected meeting with an old friend had been responsible for this untimely visit to his own quarters, asked whether he might be allowed to take me to his room.

Most ungraciously Frau Eckmüller acceded, and I noticed from what I could still see of my friend's eyes beneath his huge hat that he looked extremely uneasy and miserable.

When we reached his room he apologized for his landlady, assuring me that her bark was worse than her bite, and that compared with others of her calling she was scrupulously clean and honest. But I told him I should never be able to put up with her offensive manner, and asked him why he did not move. He explained that if he did, Frau Eckmüller would inevitably wreak her revenge either on him or on his young lady friend, a gymnastic mistress, who lived with her aunt in the flat opposite; and, by dint of further questioning and despite his protestations, I gathered that he was in love with the gymnastic mistress.

He asked me whether I would care to have a room in his friends' flat, as he knew they had one to spare and were nice people; and on my inquiring why he did not go there himself he replied that he felt sure Frau Eckmüller would put down poison if he did, or do something horrible to himself and the young lady, who, by the by, only laughed at his qualms.

I said I should be delighted to be his neighbour, and we slipped quietly out of his house and went over to his friends.

The two women who lived in the flat we entered were as attractive and diminutive as Frau Eckmüller was tall and forbidding. The aunt, who was already grey and a little bent, appeared first. She listened kindly to our proposal, and wanted to show us the front room immediately. But at that moment the niece came in. She was as short as her aunt, but more robust, and reminded me a little of my mother. She looked at my friend with her merry brown eyes, evidently expecting some fresh freak at which she would have to laugh; but my presence evidently sobered her. Sooth introduced her as Clara Butenschön.

She conducted us to the front bedroom, and as it pleased me and the rent was moderate I agreed to take it. We sat down at a table by the window and began to chat. Fräulein Clara quickly discovered my connection with Sooth, and inquired whether he had obtained Frau Eckmüller's permission to bring me to their flat. Evidently the idea of Sooth making such a request to his redoubtable landlady tickled her fancy, for she buried her pretty face in her hands and shook with laughter. Then looking up at me, she seemed to ask, "Isn't he a marvel?"

She suggested that we should draw up a joint petition and present it to Frau Eckmüller for her consideration, and laughed heartily. Poor Sooth could not understand how she could poke fun at such a serious matter, and told her so. But when Fräulein Clara and I assured him that we would support him against his landlady, he calmed down.

I went to the newspaper office that same day, and made the necessary arrangements with the father of my Munich friend, and after receiving instructions from my predecessor I accompanied the latter to the railway station and saw him off. Later on I went to the museum and saw the curator, who promised to afford me every facility for study and to place the library at my disposal.

So every morning I went to the newspaper office, and in a few days' time, with the help of a huge pair of scissors bequeathed to me by my predecessor I became familiar with the work. In the afternoon I sat in the reference library of the museum, and worked at archæology, and often took not only books, but urns and fragments of ancient pottery home with me for further study.

At home, while I ate my supper, Fräulein Clara would sometimes amuse herself by turning over the leaves of these books, while she sat and chatted with me; and, after the meal, Sooth generally turned up. He never came straight over from his own room, but always up from the street, and even then he either crept in on tiptoe or hummed and swaggered about pretending to be somebody else. As the aunt went to bed early, we usually moved from my room, which was next to hers, into her niece's room, and there Clara would mould Sooth's bust in clay, while he and I sat and talked of old times. When she had finished his bust she began one of me, and as Sooth now had nothing to do she induced him amid much laughter to try his hand at modelling.

I was curious to discover whether she had ever had any love affair, for she was five-and-twenty and it seemed unlikely that such a pretty and vivacious little body should have failed to attract a man.

She told me that she had had one romance, but that it had left such a nasty taste in her mouth that she wanted a little respite. And she laughed at herself. She had the softest and most attractive voice, particularly when she laughed. I think I might have yielded to the temptation of trying to win her affection myself had I not felt that she was genuinely fond of my friend, and that it would be an excellent thing for him to marry her. Nevertheless I have sometimes thought how happy and delightful my life might have been with this bright little creature at my side. And yet would this really have been so? I am beginning to doubt it. Mine was a nature that required storms, although it dreaded them. And it got its full measure!

About a month passed by in this way when Paul Sooth and I, attracted by the sunny spring weather, decided to make an excursion to Övelgönne and enjoy the beauties of the Elbe. We went on foot, past the Town Hall and Klopstock's grave, and, halting for a while on the terrace above Övelgönne, looked across the broad river, up which a few steamers were plying, towards the Hanoverian woods. Then we went down to the bank, where boats were being caulked, launched, and equipped with masts, sails, and sculls for the season.

Passing several landing-stages, we happened to see a group of young people busy with two boats. Among them was a middle-aged man giving instructions. His hair was almost white, but he was as straight as a dart and his eyes were bright, while in his blue yachting suit and cap with its large gold club badge he looked extremely smart.

Paul explained that he was Herr vom Gang, an authority on domestic economy, and president of various clubs, to one of which, the Philatelists, he himself belonged.

Although I liked the look of him very much, he gave me the impression of being somewhat lacking in dignity for a man of his age. Nevertheless, like everybody else along the banks of the Elbe, from Altona to Wedel—as I subsequently discovered—I felt there was something in his cheerful disposition that made one wish to know him.

As we came up he greeted my friend, and introduced himself to me with youthful eagerness.

He reminded me of an old army colonel; indeed, if one did not examine him too closely, he might have passed for one. And as in those days I did not examine people too closely I was content to treat him as such.

He discussed the weather and boating, and, smiling proudly, observed that, among other things, he had founded a yachting club.

"It was the twenty-fifth," he added with a smile. "Other people celebrate the fact of having belonged to the same club for twenty-five years. I celebrate the fact that I have founded twenty-five, and the young people still declare that they cannot do without old vom Gang."

Seeing him hailed and greeted from all directions, I remarked that he appeared to be very popular.

He gave a gratified smile. "I have always been interested in my fellow-creatures and all that concerns them," he replied "I have studied every social problem, and particularly domestic economy—a difficult problem, but I may say I have not only probed it, but also solved it."

A priceless fellow! I was delighted by such idealism. "How happy your children must be," I remarked, "to have an educator of such experience and natural gifts as a father."

He cleared his throat and seemed a trifle embarrassed.

"For the moment this is my family!" he said, pointing with a smile to the group about him.

As he spoke, a girl of about twenty came towards us down the path. She was of medium height, lithe and graceful in her movements, and her face, framed by curly hair of a reddish tinge, was fresh and refined. Her green woollen jumper hung loose about her graceful limbs, and, as she gave us a perfunctory nod, she went up to the old gentleman and said something about his having left "Mother" without a ha'penny. And dipping her hand into his breast-pocket she took out a bank-note. He smiled a trifle self-consciously, and making her face us introduced her: "My daughter Gesa, gentlemen! Gesa vom Gang!"

She gave us a nod, and then tripped lightly back by the way she had come.

. . . . .

I cannot say how it came about; all I know is that I saw in that girl all I loved and yearned for in woman. All the physical and spiritual qualities that my own nature lacked I discerned in her. Truth to tell, she possessed but few of them; but in my youthful enthusiasm I endowed her with them all. What struck me chiefly about her was that she was unfinished; she was a potentiality, a task, a pleasant mission, offered me by Fate, if only I would seize it. To me might fall the lot of bringing to the full bloom of maturity the buds that lay hid within the bosom of this young creature. What more exquisite destiny than to open her eyes to all the glories of life!

I was completely enslaved by her charm; and no wonder! For she was extraordinarily beautiful. What a picture she made in a doorway! What a noble brow she had! And how the goodness of her heart shone in her face! Yes, all that was there, and my eyes did not deceive me. But for the rest, for all that belonged to the realm of emotion, spirit, and taste—I acted on faith. I allowed my imagination free rein. I thought I saw clearly. But I was utterly mistaken.

I watched her enter her mother's house; I watched her come back. Never had my youthful eyes looked upon a girl with so much pleasure, or, rather, with such mad bewilderment!

We talked; but conversation was mere make-believe and play-acting. I was engrossed by a much more serious game.

Under her snow-white, somewhat prominent brow were a pair of beautiful shy grey-blue eyes, and her frock of blue and white striped linen fluttered in the wind. To this day I am proud of having had the courage to win her, young as I was!

She had a quick genial way of speaking, rapping out her sentences all of a sudden. Yes, she was always on the Elbe . . . the whole day long! How could anyone stand being shut up in a room? How could anyone exchange the open air for four stuffy walls?

Our eyes met for a second, then quickly turned away. But something always drew them together again, even though they might wander away for a moment. We had fallen in love at first sight!

Presently she left us and descended the bank to the landing-stage. Oh, that walk! Those dainty feet! And the attractive way she planted them! Even after her death people still spoke of the way she used to go down to the boats. But I fancy it was not the regularity of her gait that fascinated me so much as something about her knees, which touched at each step she took. In any case, whatever it was, it fired my being and wafted me to Paradise.

Paul Sooth was actually discussing with her father something or other connected with the Philatelists' Club! How could he? I had eyes only for her. She called the young men "boys," and ordered them about sharply. They all sprang eagerly into the boat, manipulated the sail, and did various other things which I did not understand and in which I was not interested. I could hoist a sail, and I could tack and row, but I had never done anything of the sort for pleasure.

The boys were ready. She bade us farewell with a little nod, and turned away. How charming that farewell was! How magnificent she looked standing at the mast!

I, who, I am proud to say, became her closest associate, and was also proud to be the most intimate friend of Eilert Mumm, who saw more deeply than most men into the secrets of the human soul and into the magic of moving waters, brought these two together once. But although, as an artist, he recognized her marvellous affinity to the wind and the water, it never entered his head to paint her. Perhaps she was too young when he met her, for he had a weakness for maturity. But I mention this only incidentally.

She was now standing in the boat, resting her delicate little hands on the shoulders of one of the boys. My vision grew clouded, and I longed for just one more glance from her bewitching eyes. And lo! I got it! Just for one brief moment, and they were gone! She had taken leave of me! She now belonged to the main-sail, the oar, and the boys. And thus they glided away.

When I was alone with Paul Sooth I asked him whether he had ever seen her like. "With the exception of Fräulein Clara Butenschön, of course!"

He admitted that she was a pretty little thing.

"A pretty little thing!"—I asked him whether he was mad, and looked anxiously into his eyes. But he was, as usual, searching the ground about him. I was on the point of saying something tactless about Clara, so enthusiastic was I about my new acquaintance. Clara was too short and too dark. "A pretty little thing!" Again I asked him whether, with the exception of Clara, he had ever seen such a lovely creature.

At last he grew reasonable, or saw what was wrong with me, and confessed that she was beautiful.

I asked him whether he could possibly explain how it was that this girl had not long ago been snapped up, sold, stolen, or stifled by some lover whom she had rejected and driven to despair. He frankly admitted that he could not make it out. With this admission our friendship, which I had begun to regard as broken, was at last renewed.

The whole of the following day only my body was in my lodgings, at the newspaper office, and the museum. Suddenly, on the way to work, it occurred to me that she might, after all, be engaged! My heart stood still. She might be accepting a proposal of marriage at that very moment and kissing her lover! Feverishly I recalled the faces of the four "boys." Two of them, I remembered, were too young, only about seventeen. But the third might have been eighteen, and he was the one on whose shoulders she had laid her hands! I imagined that this lout, whose face grew more and more insolent as my memory defined it, must be her favourite! And on the opposite bank they would have wandered off together! That's what it was! I had come on the scene too late!

I stared blankly at the passers-by. On reaching home I wrote hard all the evening, and went to bed at midnight. But I could not sleep. At last, when I did fall asleep, I was disturbed by bad dreams. Behind the four young men who were suing for her hand in the boat, I saw all her father's clubs turned out in full strength, with banners and devices flying, trying to pay her court as well. The whole of the five-and-twenty clubs! And I woke up moaning and groaning, with my hair standing on end.

On getting up I immediately set to and wrote a love-poem of sixteen stanzas, many of which had come to me in my dreams. And as soon as I entered my office I handed them to the printer's boy.

Two minutes later he came back and told me I must delete at least twelve of the sixteen. I rushed down to the compositors' room, and after a lively altercation with the foreman reduced the poem to six. In view of the agitated state of my nerves, I regard this act of selection as the most difficult thing I ever accomplished in my life. At all events, I sent the paper containing the anonymous verses, without any accompanying note, to her address.

On the following day I had a splitting headache, which made it impossible for me to go to Övelgönne. But on the day after that, which was a Sunday, I set out at daybreak. When I reached my destination I waited for some time on the deserted bank, conjuring up all kinds of visions of myself and Gesa, but particularly of Gesa. Gradually as the morning advanced the river bank became full of life and animation. As I observed the groups gathering round the boats, I constantly looked at my watch, wondering when she would come. I did this so often that for days afterwards my hand would automatically fly to the left pocket of my waistcoat.

Then at last she came!—in her green jumper, her red-gold locks framing her face—and in her hand, which was blue with cold, she held a scull.

In a trice I was beside myself again. Love! The infatuation of love! Or was she simply one of millions of similar girls all over the country? Oh, no! Impossible! She was goodness, intelligence, and blessedness incarnate. She was God's greatest miracle!

In spite of the two years I had spent in Munich I had only one or two very inadequate experiences of the sort behind me; I was as yet unspoilt and the vast field of romance was unexplored. I imagined that when one looked into the eyes of a fellow-creature their whole soul was laid bare. This was Gospel truth to me at that time. Good God, it all seemed so clear! And I felt so certain, so convinced that she and I were meant for each other, that our beliefs and tastes and the very blood that flowed in our veins were similar. Alas, what an illusion!

As she came towards me in her boat, I called out to her above the roar of the waters, and told her I was delighted to see her again.

Did she guess that I had come on purpose and had been waiting for hours? No matter! She was not unfriendly, and that was everything. She asked me whether I was expecting friends.

I replied that I had no friends, and nobody could have accused me of boasting when I told her where I came from and what I had been doing in Munich.

She grew a little bit uneasy and her manner changed. In that case, she observed, I must be a "scholar."

I immediately felt what was passing through her mind. She was no scholar! Heaven forbid! She was God's own creature, fresh from His hands. My eyes flashed as I protested that I was no scholar either—very far from it. To the devil with all scholars! I was a man, a village yokel from Stormfeld! An ignoramus. . . . I was enjoying the hour for its own sake . . . and the bank on which we were standing . . . and . . . and . . .

She guessed what I was driving at, but had not the courage to express outright. And with a swift shy glance she blushed.

Marvellous! Incredible! . . . She had understood my hint and had not taken offence! I was not repulsive to her then! On the contrary! To stop myself from shouting aloud and falling at her feet, I felt I must say something, and I asked her whether she was going for a sail.

She replied that she was and that she was waiting for a friend. "You'll like her," she added, "she's very clever. And I'm sure she will be pleased to meet you. You'll get on together like a house on fire!"

I bowed.

"But I don't know anything about such things," she continued.

I assured her that she had no need to, that she had eyes in . . . But I could get no farther. My own eyes were burning, and my voice gave way. I was head over ears in love.

Soon her friend arrived—"Fräulein Lina."

I shook hands with her. She was dark and stooped. Her eyes gazed inquiringly, appealingly, at me for a moment, then turned away and looked soulfully into the distance. Her whole manner and appearance reminded me of a weeping-willow.

Suddenly Fräulein Gesa seemed to gain confidence. She looked kindly at me and asked whether I would care to go for a little sail with them—say to Cranz and back.

I was in the seventh heaven! "Only too glad, Fräulein Gesa!"

She blushed again—I had remembered her name! Probably too my eyes told her that I was quite mad. Good! That was something!

We started off—Gesa in charge of the tiller and sails—and we got on splendidly, that is to say, if the lightning exchange of glances can be called getting on. What did we talk about? Gesa was silent. Possibly she found it as much as she could do to manage her eyes and the boat at the same time. Moreover, she was afraid of my erudition. Not so Fräulein Lina! Oh dear me, no! In fact she was a disturbing element. She was oppressive, making every word one uttered feel as heavy as lead. Whenever I opened my mouth she would gaze with pursed lips and dreamy wide-open eyes across the Elbe. Whereupon, turning them very slowly round, she would propound some tremendously profound question, such as, "What is God?" or "What is Man?" or "What is Love?" and turning her head slowly away again, gaze searchingly across the river or up at the sky.

It was no joke! I felt sure she was tormented by these vast problems, and did my best to help her and shed light on them.

But with lips still tightly pursed she continued to gaze sadly across the water or up at the sky, and made me feel that my golden words were so much rubbish. Whereupon I would seek Gesa's eyes, say a word or two about the wind or the sails—matters which did not interest me in the least—my own eyes flashing at her with all the ardour of youth.

It was a glorious trip!

When we landed Fräulein Lina left us, and Gesa allowed me to see her home. I examined the outside of the house with greedy eyes, and ached to see some member of her family. What wonderful creatures they must be! But she held out her hand to me. I gave it a little squeeze, and with a swift glance and a blush she turned round and was gone!

I did not dare to force my company upon her on the following day, but did my work at the office, my mind a whirl of ideas. Late at night, when my brain was too tired for work, although I could not sleep, I set out for Övelgönne, full of dreams and visions, and stood for hours against the breastwork of the bridge, gazing at her house.

I had suggested to the Butenschöns that to give Paul Sooth a little peace he and I should change rooms. I also wished to bring my friend into closer touch with Clara. The two women agreed to the suggestion, and I informed Sooth and Frau Eckmüller of the decision.

It was a great shock to them both. Frau Eckmüller planted six pails of water in a row along the hall, and held forth at great length and with violent gesticulations on the ease with which men were caught in the toils of a gymnastic costume. As for Sooth, he wandered about for hours, with his hat drawn well over his eyes, certain that there would be poison for somebody after this, in spite of all the laughter of a certain young lady who failed to see the gravity of the situation. But on the following day both Frau Eckmüller and Sooth seemed to be reconciled to the change, and I became the former's lodger.

All I remember of my second and third sail with Gesa was that her friend was with us, and that our conversation was as painful as it had been on the first occasion. Gesa said very little, and when she did speak it was chiefly about the tides, the wind, and the foresail, while Fräulein Lina asked questions about the universe and metempsychosis. But when, as soon as the questions had been put, she turned her eyes sadly towards the horizon without seeming to expect an answer, it was, to say the least, disconcerting. So one day I begged Gesa, at the door, to let us go for a sail alone. I swore I should split in two, and that one-half would forthwith become incorporated in the great soul of the universe, and the other half fall at her feet, if she did not consent. She suggested that I should join her on a trip with the "boys," but I declined. Whereupon she made various other proposals. But at last, when every alternative had been rejected, she yielded in great confusion to my request.

I understand now that all this time she had used Fräulein Lina as a sort of shield against my erudition, which terrified her.

I was proud of her high opinion of me, though it presented a serious obstacle. For I longed to get closer to her. I longed to be on familiar terms with her. O joy! I wanted to call her endearing names, to kiss her hands—her mouth! O blissful folly!

And lo! when I had reached the highest pitch of excitement, I discovered that she had a love. Yes, she was in love—with the Elbe and with sailing. And so I talked to her about these things. With a look of profoundest innocence I discussed the Elbe and sailing with her for quite a long time.

And she became quite animated! Gradually, bit by bit, she began to explain. Her simple, loyal heart opened in the most touching manner. Oh, the Elbe! Her father! The wind! Sailing! The regattas! The Elbe! The Elbe! . . .

I played a part. True, I took a delight in Nature; and enjoyed the spectacle of the open water and the boats. But I loved it all in a different way from that of Gesa and her friends, rejoicing in it as a manifestation of life, as a courageous conquest of the elements on the part of man, quite apart from the technicalities of navigation.

Did I at this juncture perceive the vast chasm between her soul and mine? Alas, no! I thought her love of the river entrancing. I regarded her attachment to four square yards of sail-cloth as most touching!

Timidly I laid my hand on hers, but she gently moved it away. I told her that the verses I had sent her were by me. She blushed. I confessed that three times I had spent half the night on the bridge, gazing at her house; but of my visions and inspirations I said nothing, for fear of alarming her again.

Then she slowly edged her hand along the side of the boat until it touched mine.

That evening in the twilight, outside her door, I ventured to kiss her!

Afterwards, when I was alone, I regarded this as the bravest deed of my life.

CHAPTER XV

A Difficult Negotiation

There were two considerations that led me to go north about this time. The first was my own anxiety about Engel Tiedje, in whose letters I had begun to discern a disquieting tone; the second was Eva's uneasiness about Ernemann. Apparently Ernemann was in the habit of going to Hamburg every Sunday to see Dutti Kohl, who was now doing business with Fritz Hellebeck. At first I had paid no particular attention to this news, but on reading the letter a second time I began to feel qualms, and reproached myself with not having, in the first place, raised objections to Ernemann's joining Fritz.

Having found some one to take over my work for a fortnight I therefore set out one day for Stormfeld, and reached the village at dusk. Engel Tiedje was working on the tyre of a cart wheel. He seemed to have shrunk and grown thinner.

I had expected him to be overjoyed at the sight of me, but as a matter of fact he looked frightened and let the tongs fall from his hand.

I asked him how he was, but he could hardly answer. To comfort him I described my life and work in Hamburg and Altona, and as I did so my eyes wandered round the forge, which did not appear to be very busy; indeed, there was hardly any work being done at all.

"Well, Engel?" I said cheerily, trying to put him at his ease. "How's the account-book?"

In a low voice, with beads of perspiration glistening on his brow, he replied: "The account-book has gone wrong somehow, but how I don't know."

I suggested that we should examine it together, and he went to fetch it. "Do you know," he remarked, as he handed it to me, "I believe it is bewitched!"

I noticed that it had grown very dirty and worn since I had last seen it, and I tried in vain to make out its contents. "Just read out what stands on that page!" I exclaimed at last.

With knees shaking, and supporting himself with difficulty, he proceeded to read out various items, consisting chiefly of repairs, and as he came to an end two great tears rolled down his cheeks.

I could not bear to see him cry. "Have you always added it up correctly?" I asked.

He nodded. "And yet for a twelvemonth I have had no money," he exclaimed, breathing heavily, "and have not been able to buy any iron. There's only one thing to do, Otto; we must sell the forge so that you can continue your studies." He himself would find work as an assistant elsewhere.

We were silent for a while. Once more I took up the book. But it was no good. Neither of us could discover the trouble. All the other forges were flourishing. What could be wrong with ours? It must be bewitched!

While he was preparing our supper I told him a story to divert his mind. It was an old legend relating to our village. But I noticed that he was not really paying attention. Moreover, he tried to correct certain improbabilities in my narrative—a habit he maintained until the end in regard to my literary work—and finally made me bring my tale to a close, so that once again we sat silently side by side.

I took it for granted that he was in debt, and declared that since matters were so bad we must sell the place and he must get a situation as an assistant in another village. I was extremely sad.

When we went into the house I was much depressed to find it dirty and untidy; but he would not leave me until I was in bed and had solemnly assured him that I was comfortable.

As I lay alone thinking, I felt a longing to keep the home of my dear parents, and began to plan how this could be done. Gazing into the moonlit room, I fancied I could see my mother sitting in her usual place, with my dear father opposite her, on the other side of the stove. They were in their Sunday clothes, and seemed to be looking at me.

I thought it all out. My distress made me see things clearly, and I began to understand that I was not meant to be either a scholar or a scientist. As I listened to the wind from the sea, which had been my childhood's lullaby, I did not feel inclined to sleep, but made plans for my future and the calling I should adopt. And thus I came to the conclusion that writing was my vocation. Indeed, had I not taken the first steps in that direction with my work on the Hamburg paper? And might it not be possible to keep both my lifelong friend and the home of my parents by what I could earn in this way?

Sitting up in bed, I peered once more into the moonlit room, and saw all the pictures of my childhood again. Then suddenly—I cannot be certain whether I was awake or asleep, but I do know that I was extremely surprised—I thought I saw Mamsell Boehmke's Town Hall of Lüneberg on my mother's sewing-table. And this made me wonder whether it might not be possible to persuade her to take up her abode in that room. Yes, then the account-book would be put right, comfort and cleanliness would be restored, and I should be able, when I was far away, to think of the dear old house without a qualm.

When I went to the forge in the morning Engel Tiedje was already bending over the fire making the coffee.

As soon as we sat down to breakfast I went straight to the point. Speaking with more cheerfulness than I felt, I gave him a rough outline of what had passed through my mind during the night about adopting literature as a profession.

I noticed that a good deal of what I said was beyond him, but that he seemed quite ready to listen and acquiesce. There comes a time in the life of every capable son when from having been his parents' disciple he becomes their guide. And I felt this hour had come for me. I told him firmly that I wished to keep my old home not only for my own sake, but for his, and speaking with great friendliness and circumspection I added that as I wanted to feel happy about him I must perforce discuss the matter of the account-book again.

Never before had I seen him look so crushed and depressed—he was a regular heap of misery.

I was silent for a moment to give him time to see how matters stood. Then I told him my plan about Mamsell Boehmke.

He almost collapsed and looked like an anvil that had suddenly sunk half its depth into the ground at the first blow from the hammer. "She is a kind body, Engel," I continued gently, "and I believe she could discover the mistake in the account-book which you and I cannot. Anyhow, there is more order in the Town Hall of Lüneberg than in our accounts."

"You know what I have gone through already!" he replied, looking up at me appealingly like a child.

I tried to reassure him by telling him that he need have none of his old fears regarding fire, as far as Mamsell Boehmke was concerned. "At least we can ask her. She can but refuse," I added.

He shook his head. "She'll never refuse a blacksmith, Otto," he replied, looking anxiously up at me. "But if you really mean it, Otto, then, of course, I must do it," he continued in deep distress.

So we arranged to have her over on trial, as it were; and agreed that at a certain sign from Engel I should conclude that it was all off.

She was delighted to see me, and I assured her of the pleasure I felt at being allowed once more to behold the Town Hall of Lüneberg and the spotless cleanliness of her rooms. She had grown grey, but her cheeks were still round and shiny, and she smiled in the same old way.

I proceeded to tell her about the forge, and said that things were in a bad way over there.

"There's no woman there, that's what's the matter, dear Otto," she replied.

I observed that the account-book was in a muddle.

"Your father and Engel Tiedje certainly wrote everything down," she replied, "but they never liked to ask for their money. And people got to know that, particularly the light-fingered ones, and that's why lots of them never pay a halfpenny."

I was very much upset at this information, and immediately invited her to go across to the forge with me, as we wanted her advice about certain domestic matters.

She consented with alacrity, and we went over.

As we entered Engel Tiedje shot his last load of coal on to the fire, and blew the bellows with all his might, while his eyes wandered up and down and all round the walls of the forge.

She noticed his strange behaviour, and drew her own conclusions. Then, turning to me, she remarked that I could have no idea of how terrified she was of the forge fire.

Engel cleared his throat and blew the bellows more fiercely than ever.

I expressed surprise, saying that I thought most women liked a blacksmith's fire.

"Oh!" she cried, "if it were ever my fate to be the wife of a blacksmith—not that there's much chance of that, though, or any need for it—I wouldn't put my head inside the forge from one year's end to the other." And she appealed to Engel to confirm her statement, declaring that whenever she had had anything to say to him she had always remained outside, or stood at the kitchen door.

Engel Tiedje had not opened his mouth, and his eyebrows seemed to have vanished for ever beneath his fringe. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Yes, but sometimes you might suddenly find yourself called in here to lend a hand quickly, and you would have to stand on the other side of the anvil and strike and strike till the sparks flew up to the ceiling. Why, I've known cases where a blacksmith's wife has been pierced through the body by a red-hot iron when that happened!"

"No—no, Engel!" she exclaimed, trembling with fear, "I would simply tell you to get an apprentice, and leave me to my kitchen and my garden. No, I'm not like Uhle Monk!"

I nodded at my old friend, to show that I believed every word she said, and advised him to go ahead with the business. When she left us to look round the house, he asked me in an anxious whisper to settle everything.

I found her in the kitchen, described our desperate plight, and laid our proposal before her. After a little hesitation she agreed, and I went back to the forge.

Engel Tiedje was hammering on the anvil loud enough to deafen the whole village, and I had to shriek to make myself heard. I told him that he must speak to her at once, and that I was off to the parish clerk. I noticed that beads of perspiration broke out on his brow and that he wiped it with his dark red handkerchief. This was the only preparation he made for his proposal, and as he went in the direction of the kitchen I fled from the house.

The parish clerk was quite amenable, and arranged for the wedding to take place the following week. Had he not known the couple nearly all their lives? So what need for the usual formalities? Why should the two old people wait a fortnight?

On the next day Mamsell Boehmke came across and cleaned up the house, and six days later we carried her belongings over. I conveyed the Town Hall of Lüneberg myself, and she was deeply moved when I placed it on my mother's sewing-table.

After the wedding at church we all three sat round the table to a pleasant meal, and before taking my leave I paid a last visit to every room in the house.

It was not yet dark when I reached Ballum. At Auntie Lena's I found all the doors open, and everything going on as usual. Seven or eight little girls were sitting on the stairs knitting stockings. Auntie Lena had filled out and was looking older and more matronly, although her hair remained fair for some years longer. She was installed in her great armchair with a knitting-needle in her mouth and a coarse grey stocking in her hand, while beside her sat an old woman who was her prime confidante where wool was concerned.

It was a pleasant picture!

When she heard my footsteps she did not look up, but observed in her usual matter-of-fact tones: "Their teacher says that these seven girls will never learn to knit a stocking, they are so stupid. So I had to do something to save the honour of Ballum!"

"Is that the way to receive me after I have been away for nearly three years?" I inquired.

She looked up, hiding her surprise and emotion. "Why should I make a fuss about members of the family?" she replied maliciously. "But fancy you behaving like that! If I had been a girl, you would have taken the needles out of my mouth and kissed me."

I went up to her and did as she asked, and her eyes filled with tears.

"No!" she exclaimed in her old familiar voice, "I can't stand that!" And, looking me up and down, she observed sarcastically that I looked very well, "almost like a man. Or, at all events, one can see that you will soon be one."

The children ran off home, as it was getting dark.

Soon Uncle Gosch came home from the school, with his books under his arm. As soon as he recognized me, he shook hands, and holding me at arm's-length, exclaimed with a smile of childish pride: "Well, what have you got to say now? How is our Cause faring? I may say *our* Cause, because you have played an important part in it. Can't you imagine the feelings of old Sven Modersohn! How light-heartedly he crossed swords with me! But now it's as plain as a pikestaff that I shall be justified up to the hilt."

I assured him that I did not doubt it and was very pleased.

"But what will you do when you have polished off old Modersohn?" Auntie Lena inquired. "You seem to be very anxious to make an end of him."

Uncle Gosch beamed: "When I have reduced him to complete silence, my love," he replied, "my main task will only just have begun. I shall then set to work to write a book about the whole controversy."

They told me that the children were both well. Ernemann had recently paid them a visit and was quite happy. Fritz Hellebeck treated him exactly like a friend. As for Eva, when I heard she was paying a call in the town I set off immediately to meet her.

I recognized her while she was still some distance away by her free-and-easy, vigorous walk. She had on hat on, and the last glow of the evening sky was reflected in her hair, which was still very fair. My heart was filled with a blissful sense of possession as my eyes feasted on her form, and my joy increased when I saw her eyes light up with pleasure as she recognized me.

She laid her hand in mine and shook it as she chided me for coming to meet her. The fact that I intended calling for her at the house she was visiting instead of waiting for her outside struck her as denoting a change in me. "Never mind," she said, "the chief thing is that you wanted to see me at once!"

"No one means as much to me as you do," I replied eagerly.

Then she chaffed me about all my old flames, and I blushed.

"But you've grown!" she cried, "and your voice has changed! It is fuller and deeper."

I felt embarrassed, and inquired about the Mumms, asking whether Dutti still went there.

She nodded. Apparently my aunt wanted to get richer, and, knowing very little about financial matters, chose advisers who at least appeared to be reliable. Both Dutti and Fritz Hellebeck came over to see her occasionally, the former from Hamburg.

As for Barbara, she still retained her weakness for big men.

Feeling we were approaching the subject nearest her heart, Eva shook my arm again. "Don't forget the most important of all, Holler!" she exclaimed.

With some hesitation I inquired: "Is Eilert still away?"

She nodded, and I could see that she was struggling with her tears. I felt disconcerted, for it meant she was still head over ears in love with him.

But I tried to comfort her. "He is still young and giddy," I replied. "But he will grow steady and come back."

She shook her head and cried. She did not believe there would ever be any permanent change in him. "Don't imagine I am not fond of everything free, exuberant, and wild," she said, "in its proper time and place. But, you see, I cling to an orderly respectable existence. And he is incapable of that, and always will be. He hasn't got a grain of respectability in his composition. We know how great and good he is, but he goes too far. He is a wild primitive creature."

We were silent for a while, oppressed by the feeling of helplessness in the face of natural forces. Then I asked, almost in a whisper, whether anyone knew where he was, and whether he ever wrote to anybody.

She replied that he never wrote, but that sailors had brought reports of him from time to time, and that he had returned to Holland and Flanders, where he was feverishly copying Old Masters.

Then she asked me all about myself, and I told her everything. When I informed her of my decision to adopt literature as a profession, she observed in a low despondent tone: "So you are going to be an artist too."

Moved by the despair in her voice, I replied hotly: "Perhaps, Eva, but I trust I shall not upset other people's lives."

But she could not reconcile herself to the idea, and, catching hold of my hand, begged me to accept a little money—a thousand marks—which she had inherited from an aunt, so that I might continue my studies.

I thanked her from the bottom of my heart, told her she was nearer and dearer to me than anybody else in the whole world, but that I had definitely chosen what I thought was the right path.

How strange is the human heart! At that time I was conscious only of deep and passionate friendship for her. My love remained hidden from me. The memories of my childhood and the reverence I had felt and still felt for her prevented it from reaching consciousness.

. . . . .

At supper Auntie Lena chaffed me a good deal about my life in Hamburg, and when she grew tired of that she turned her attention to her defenceless husband, and told us details about their courting days. During the meal a letter arrived from Ernemann. He said he now had a good position with his friend Hellebeck, and that he was often obliged to go to Hamburg with large sums of money for Dutti Kohl.

Once again I began to feel anxious. "Auntie Lena," I said, "he is still very young; do you think it is right? And what about that fellow Dutti Kohl?"

"Yes," she replied, "if he were just an ordinary youth like yourself . . ."

I smiled and looked at Eva, wondering whether she was smiling too. But she was very grave, and looked anxiously down at the table.

It was during this visit to Ballum that Uhle Monk was married to one of the shepherds. And we all attended the ceremony.

On the way to the farm I gathered a good deal of information about old friends, and heard from Busch that his son Helmut was a locksmith in Hamburg, after having been in the Guards for two years. A less pleasant bit of news was that he had become a Socialist.

I reminded the old man that there were quite as many decent people in the ranks of the Socialist party as in any other; but he would not agree, and was obviously disappointed that his son had not remained in the Army and become a sergeant-major.

I was never quite clear as to which of the shepherds Uhle actually married, but I gathered that the matter had been settled by drawing lots, and that Jan was the happy man. As to how she managed to distinguish them, we were informed on the way to the wedding that, provided their dog, Flock, was present, it was simple enough, for the animal always sat on Jan's left hand and Jacob's right, but that Uhle had presumably discovered some other way of telling them apart when the dog was not there.

During the festivities I found an opportunity of informing Uhle of her first husband's recent marriage, and she pressed my hand gratefully. Then I asked her whether she was quite happy.

She nodded and with a sly furtive expression in her eyes whispered: "Where else could he go, except here? He can't go back to his mother."

For the moment I could not, for the life of me, imagine to whom she referred. Suddenly it flashed across my mind, and, somewhat taken aback, I inquired: "Is that why you married?"

She nodded happily. She was a mere child, with the outlook and conscience of a child. "He will certainly come back," she said in a whisper, "probably with no shoes or stockings to his feet. And then he can come and live at the sheep-farm."

After the wedding breakfast the married couple went off amid a deafening uproar. Some averred that it was the wrong shepherd who took his place in the broken-down carriage. Others declared it was the right one. Uhle Monk, slightly the worse for drink, shouted and laughed with the rest. I was of Eilert's breed. I felt, as he did, the glamour and glory of her womanhood. How wonderfully she walked! How firm and comely was her form! How beautiful that red mouth and that hearty laugh, despite its monotony and its boorishness! Are not the wind and sea monotonous?

Suddenly I felt sure that it really was the wrong shepherd who had got into the carriage, and I ran over to Auntie Lena.

"Oh, my dear boy," she exclaimed, "they'll put that all right! And even if they don't, what does such a trifling mistake matter? Look how often in life one snatches at the wrong thing! Just you be careful! I have a sort of feeling that you are on the point of doing the same thing."

How true her words were! But I did not know it at the time.

After midnight, when all the dancing and festivities were over and Auntie Lena had succeeded in procuring a bed at the farm, I found myself seated in the large room downstairs, between two sailors, who told me their life-story, and, as usual, I was a good listener. Opposite me sat Peter Bohlen, the parson who had married the happy pair, and to judge from his face he appeared to be listening too.

All at once, as, lost in thought, I raised my head, whom should I see standing before me but Eilert Mumm, in a reddish-brown suit with a travelling pack on his back—a wanderer indeed!

He smiled, nodded his great head at me, shook hands with everybody and sat down.

"I walked here along the beach," he said in his calm strong voice, "and heard about the wedding. Have the couple gone already?"

He was so natural and simple. Most of those present knew him, and no one seemed surprised to see him suddenly sitting among the wedding guests. He was given some food, and, as he was hungry, he ate eagerly. He always ate enough for two. During his repast he talked to Pastor Bohlen, describing the route he had taken from Skagen, the wind, and the scenery. Wonderful!

There was a great deal of noise all over the farm, even in the calf-sheds, where some couples had found their way. But there was most noise and crowd round the table where Eilert and Pastor Bohlen were sitting. The latter was leaning back now, drinking and gesticulating, and with shining eyes describing the wild life of former days. From time to time he gave a loud laugh, while opposite him sat Eilert Mumm, with a broad grin on his face.

At about three o'clock, when everybody was beginning to have had enough, people started slipping away two by two. Eilert shouldered his rucksack again, and I accompanied him out on to the dyke. The sea was lapping lazily against the stone of the sea-wall and over the dunes, the outlines of which were lost in the darkness and mist ahead. Dawn was breaking, and the cry of the sea-gulls could already be heard. I asked him whether he had called on anyone in Ballum.

He shook his head, and replied that he had come only to get another glimpse of the old houses and trees, and possibly of Uhle Monk. "But she wasn't there!" he added. "What a mad freak of hers, this wedding!"

Something prevented me from telling him why she had done it, and I noticed that he asked no news of Eva and her family. The little Philistine of Ballum had vanished from his ken.

We shook hands and parted at the next fence. He was on his way to Holland, and I returned to the sheep-farm to fetch Auntie Lena.

CHAPTER XVI

Evil Days

I HAD intended to stay another week in Ballum, but on the following morning I received a telegram from my friend in Altona which left me no alternative but to return forthwith. I had not been back for more than two days, and had hardly returned to my old routine, though on the previous evening I had spent a delicious time in a certain boat below Övelgönne, when who should turn up at my rooms, just as I had got back from the newspaper office, but Eva Bornholt from Ballum! And as soon as I saw her pale face and the sad look in her eyes I felt certain that something had happened to Ernemann.

As a matter of fact he had written a most confused letter to his mother, telling her that he had been charged by his chief with having misappropriated a sum of money which he should have taken to Dutti Kohl in Hamburg, that the accusation was false, but that as he could offer no defence he was obliged to fly to avoid being locked up. By the same post came a letter from Hellebeck announcing the loss of the money. He mentioned whom he suspected of being the culpirt, and added that Ernemann had disappeared in the direction of Hamburg.

I was very much upset by the news, particularly as I felt so helpless. It was only afterwards that I discovered that this feeling arose from an experience of my own, the memory of which lay deeply buried in my mind and was never entirely dormant.

But how sorry I felt for Eva! What misery lay in the depths of her dear eyes! I pressed her hands and kissed them.

She thought the best plan would be to go to Dutti first, and when she asked me to accompany her I reminded her that, after all, I was Ernemann's brother as well as hers.

She put her arm in mine, and pressed it as she had done in Ballum, and my words seemed to have brought the first tears to her eyes.

I cannot understand why I did not clasp her in my arms then and there, and comfort her, although there was but little comfort in my own heart. Who knows what might have happened had I done so? But I still felt I was a poor village waif, and she seemed so far above me—an object of adoration!

We found Dutti engaged in conversation with two women in deep mourning. Looking extremely smart and dignified, he begged us to excuse him a moment; then, noticing that our decent appearance did him credit, he observed to his lady clients: "Some old friends from home."

"You will get me the highest possible rate of interest on my money, won't you, Herr Kohl?" I heard one of them say. "My friend, Frau Strohmeyer, assured me that you paid a higher rate than anyone else."

After a while they left, and Dutti, returning from the door, hugged me to his bosom. "What a pity it is," he observed in melancholy tones, "that people understand so little about business, dear Babendiek, particularly the women!" Then, turning tearfully to Eva, he added: "I need not inquire why you have come. All the same, let me ask first of all how your dear mother is. And what is lovely Barbara Mumm doing? It is a fortnight since I have seen her to speak to, but I shall be in Ballum again to-morrow. Frau Mumm has invited me to a little party. . . . How is everybody? . . . Is there any news of Eilert?"

Eva, shaking her head, declared she could not talk about these matters now, and implored him to tell her about her brother's affairs.

Sitting down beside me and clasping me once more with his great fat arm, he said sanctimoniously: "It is very painful to us, dear Babendiek, to have to discuss this matter before his distressed sister."

"For God's sake, Dutti, come to the point!" I retorted impatiently.

Looking sadly at us, he replied that the matter was unfortunately only too simple. "I do a great deal of business with Fritz Hellebeck," he added. "Didn't we know each other in the old Steenkarken days?—you remember the theft at your Uncle Peter's? . . ."

I blushed, and beads of perspiration broke out on my forehead. He noticed this and was pleased.

"Well," he continued, "we deal in iron pyrites, brickworks, mortgages, and so on, and young Bornholt occasionally conveyed stocks and money between this office and Hellebeck's. I can't think why Hellebeck preferred this method to the post, but he did."

Whereupon he embarked upon a digression about stout old Holstein hearts and childhood friendships, and I peremptorily ordered him to get to the point and stick to it.

"Very well, then, under your brother's eye, Fräulein Eva," he went on, "Fritz Hellebeck, in addition to other papers, put a packet containing twelve thousand marks in banknotes into the dispatch-case your brother was to bring here."

"Did my brother let the packet out of his sight or out of his hands, even for a moment, after he took charge of it?" asked Eva.

"Not in Hellebeck's office, or in his presence," Dutti replied. And, turning to me, he added sadly: "And when Fritz Hellebeck says a thing—eh, dear Babendiek?—we know it's the true old Holstein stuff, don't we? For he is a Teuton of the old stock. . . . But to cut a long story short, your brother left the office, arrived here, opened the dispatch-case in front of me, emptied it, and then suddenly, with his eyes starting out of his head, exclaimed that the packet of banknotes was missing. We made inquiries. We telephoned. But what was the good? Unfortunately your brother was forced to acknowledge, in the first place, that he loved luxury and fine clothes, and secondly, that Fritz Hellebeck had put the packet of notes into the case under his very nose. So Fritz was obliged to tell your brother on the telephone that he would report the matter to the police. For, as honest business men, it was impossible for either of us to lie under the suspicion of carelessness or theft. Honesty, you know, Fräulein Eva, honesty must always come first with us business men! That's true, if anything ever was, isn't it, Babendiek?" And he gave a sly smile and hugged me tightly.

He also informed us that Ernemann had gone away quite desperate, and that he had not the faintest idea where he was. Then we took our departure.

When we were outside Eva asked me whether I believed her brother had taken the money. I replied that I thought he was probably careless in regard to business matters, and that was why I thought it had been a mistake to send him to Fritz

Hellebeck, who had not had any proper business training either. But I thought it inconceivable that he should have deliberately stolen a large sum of money: "He was too easy-going to do such a terrible thing," I said. "Besides, for his parents' sake alone he would have resisted the temptation. He is too fond of his mother, and too anxious to do her honour. Hence his despair."

"You know that mother has always been very lenient with him," Eva rejoined, pale to the lips, "because he is so delicate. And now she will be terrified of his breaking down altogether. Oh, Holler dear! If only that fellow Hellebeck had never crossed our threshold!"

The same thought had occurred to me. "And it was I who introduced him!" I exclaimed bitterly.

She pressed my arm and assured me that she had not meant it in that way. "He was your friend," she said; "it could not be helped."

We got into a tram, and I saw from her dear face that she was deep in thought. "Tell me," she said, after a while, "I know so little about your friend . . . there is something so affable and kindly about him that my parents and Ernemann took to him at once. . . . But Eilert and I did not altogether like him."

I said I had noticed this.

"Yes," she continued, "and although his affability and good-nature may not be put on, I could not help feeling that, with all his kindliness to others, he was kindest of all to himself."

The idea was new to me, and I replied that it might possibly be so.

"Yes," she went on, "I should think he is ten times kinder to himself than to other people."

I protested, and said I did not believe it.

After a brief silence she apologized for her attitude, explaining that she had not the faith in my friend that I had, and reminding me that she was fighting for her brother. "What we must find out," she added, "is whether Fritz Hellebeck could derive any advantage from the disappearance of the money."

I was terrified by the coldness in her voice and by her line of argument, and distressed that she should be driven by her grief to harbour such notions. I pointed out that Ernemann had himself admitted that the money had been placed in the case in his presence, and that he had discovered its disappearance on reaching Hamburg.

At my lodgings we discussed the matter with Paul Sooth, who undertook to go to the police for us, to make inquiries about Ernemann and find out whether he had been arrested.

Meanwhile, sitting disconsolately with Eva, I tried to divert her mind by telling her about Gesa, how I had met her, how beautiful, kind, and loving she was, and what wonderful hours I had already spent with her! I also told her what a delightful family she had—I did not even know them yet—and spoke of my intended marriage.

I could not see her face very well, as it was getting dark, but she laid a hand on my arm and told me that she was pleased for my sake, and that her parents would also be glad.

I noticed that her voice sounded tired and desperate, and that my news did not seem to have cheered her very much. What an idiot I was! What a blind, deaf idiot!

After a while Paul Sooth returned. Apparently Ernemann was suspected of being in the neighbourhood of the harbour, though he had not yet been found.

We then left Eva, who was dead tired, in Fräulein Butenschön's care, and set out in search of him—Paul Sooth going to the railway station and I to the harbour.

Directly after I had left Sooth, whom should I see in front of me, a little way up the street, but my old friend Balle Bohnsack? He was in his work-a-day clothes, his large dingy yellow cap on the back of his head as usual, and his yellow fringe sticking out in front of it over his forehead. He seemed to be waiting for somebody. Suddenly a maid-servant, all stiff and starched and clean as a new pin, came out of a doorway, and in a trice, thanks to his long practice with calves and other headstrong animals, he had succeeded in cornering her. I went up to the couple and greeted them.

They were delighted to see me, but Balle did not waste much time on formal greetings. "What's the matter with the girl?" he exclaimed in the fatherly tones of a benevolent judge. "Without consulting me you go and take a place in Altona!"

Oddly enough she did not run away. He could not have stopped her if she had tried to escape. But, indignant as she was at every word he uttered, something seemed to rivet her to the spot. With flashing eyes she told him she was still afraid he was dotty.

"Yes," he replied, "and you don't care how much your words hurt me. It strikes me," he added in his most paternal manner, "that when I ask you a friendly question, you might be good enough to answer. As we shall have to live together one day, I am naturally interested in everything you do."

She seemed to doubt whether he were in his senses. "I wanted a change," she replied.

He shrugged his shoulders. "That you can have with me later on, my child," he replied with great dignity. "You will get change enough in my business!"

She shook her head. Was he drunk? And she looked desperately at me.

He declared that he was not altogether sure about her. He had heard rumours that a sweep was pursuing her.

"A sweep!" she cried, pale with horror. "That proves that you're quite dotty. Fancy *me* going with a sweep!"

"Well, well," he retorted, "I am pleased to find I was wrong."

Amusing as this conversation was, I could not endure it any longer, and told them both what had happened.

Dina, who was about Ernemann's age, and had often been to see his plays, burst into tears. But Balle was practical and went straight to the point. "That little fellow Ernemann?" he exclaimed. "Hanging about the harbour so as to get abroad—eh? Yes, it's possible. He was a nice young chap," he added. "I often used to see him in the cattle market. Very well, you spend the night hanging round the harbour. I won't say anything for certain; but I have an idea . . . Let us meet punctually at seven at your lodgings to-morrow morning."

I gave him my address and deplored the fact that he would have to knock about all night. "But you were like that as a boy, when you stood by me in the playground," I added, deeply moved.

He laughed and gave me an extraordinary wink with one eye, which seemed to leave his other eyebrow free to rise and fall in the most daring fashion.

"You were in a nice pickle then!" he exclaimed. And, turning to Dina, he added: "This is the first occasion on which you have been anything like decent to me—almost cordial, in fact!"

She opened her tear-stained eyes wide, and cried: "*Me?*"

"Yes," he replied. "At all events, I am very pleased with you, my child, and feel quite happy about you now. You see, we shall be the happiest couple in Schleswig! A pair of turtle-doves!" And he held out his hand to her.

At first she would not take it. Then, her fine blue eyes again filling with tears, she said: "All right, but only because you are going to look for Ernemann to-night."

Moved by her tears, he nodded and left her.

I spent a long night in the rain, walking up and down the harbour, stumbling in and out of boats, and going into one public-house after another. But without either hope or success. I could not have been more distressed if I had spent the night searching for my own brother. And when I returned to my lodgings I found Paul Sooth, whose quest had also been vain.

As we entered I saw Eva huddled up asleep on a chair, and beside her Auntie Lena, wide awake. She had not been able to endure the suspense any longer, but had come by the night train.

Eva, disturbed by our entry, woke up, and the two women, seeing from our faces that we had failed, burst into tears. It broke my heart to see them.

We talked in a desultory fashion for about half an hour, and then, hearing the front door open, I went out.

It was Balle, and from the way he winked I knew he had found him.

He walked in, shook hands with Auntie Lena and the others, and, anxious to show his sympathy to the stately well-dressed matron, he called her by the name by which we all knew her, though he invariably added: "With all due respect." He said he had discovered the "little creature" dead tired in a public-house where the Danish cattle-dealers usually congregated. He had promised to stay there. Then, turning to me, he added: "I've got a cab. . . ."

I shook his hand heartily, and Auntie Lena went up to him crying bitterly. "I have heard a great deal about you," she said, "and I and that young fool over there"—she meant me—"have often maligned you. But what you have done for me now is wonderful."

Balle evidently felt he must try to raise our spirits. He smiled, and closing one eye replied with his usual assurance: "I feel sure, Auntie Lena—with all due respect—that you would be only too glad to do the same for me. Now there is a certain young woman, for instance, of whom you may possibly have heard . . . and she won't do what she ought to do. Perhaps you could help me."

We all went downstairs, got into the cab, and drove off, Balle sitting with the driver. We soon reached our destination.

Balle wanted to remain behind, but I said we might want him. As we entered the spacious bar, which was still very dark, we noticed that the benches along the walls were covered with horse-blankets, evidently used as shake-downs by the guests. Only two people were visible—a young cattle-drover, who was asleep, and Ernemann. The latter was sitting with his head bowed, not daring to look up.

But as soon as he saw his mother he gave a little cry and sprang to his feet. Making a dash towards her, he buried his head in her breast, as if, for all the world, he wanted to become one with her.

She led him to the opposite bench, and sitting down with her usual majesty took him on her lap. He swayed from side to side, groaning in abject misery. He did not want to go to prison—no, he wanted to go to America.

Gently and by little and little, she began to question him, as a mother questions a child that has had a bad fall.

He explained how careless Hellebeck was with money, leaving everything open and lying about. He had often been tempted, but had never yielded. But what good would it do, even if he swore on oath that he had not taken the money? Hellebeck had put the notes in the case, and they had disappeared.

"Think a moment, Ernemann!" exclaimed Eva, who had been listening intently—never had I seen her look so searchingly at anyone. "He put the money with the other things into the case. Well—what then? Try to remember exactly what happened! Did you pick the case up at once and go out? Think hard!"

Ernemann's sobs ceased a moment and he pondered. Then he replied, as though he attached no importance either to the question or the answer: "We were in the office. Hellebeck put the money in the case. Then I went to fetch my coat, which was in the lobby close by . . . yes, and Hellebeck followed me. And I pulled on my coat and put on my hat."

"And where did you say the case was?" Eva inquired.

"Hellebeck had it in his hand as he followed me into the lobby."

"Oh, indeed!" cried Eva, glancing at me.

I deplored the line she was taking, which seemed to me mistaken. "Well, Ernemann," I said, "then you left. Try to remember exactly. . . ."

"Is my brother less to you than your friend?" she asked, truculently interrupting me.

"I cannot believe what you do," I replied hotly. "What! Fritz Hellebeck, rich and a gentleman bred, tamper with his assistant's case when his back was turned! Well, go on, Ernemann."

But there was no more to relate. He shrugged his slender shoulders, and again began to cry out that he did not want to go to prison. He would prefer to throw himself into the Elbe, and wanted his mother to jump in with him.

Eva, Balle, and I then held a consultation as to how the money, or at least part of it, could be returned. I thought I could contribute two thousand marks, and Balle offered a similar sum, while Eva had the whole of her little legacy, consisting of three thousand marks, in her bag. It looked as if we should be able to return about eight thousand marks immediately, and we told the other two of our scheme.

But Ernemann grew so violent that I really began to fear for his reason. He said that would be tantamount to an admission of his guilt, and he admitted nothing. He had not stolen the money. All he wanted was to get across the frontier to Denmark. He felt certain that his innocence would be proved, and that he would return.

Poor Auntie Lena! The Queen of Ballum and everybody's friend in need! She could do nothing now except press her boy again and again to her breast crying: "Yes, yes, all right, it will be all right!" She could think of nothing else.

And neither could we.

At last Balle brushed the hair from his brow and observed slowly and deliberately: "I'm not so ready to dismiss the idea about Denmark, Auntie Lena, with all due respect; for what do our sort do—I mean we men of the cattle trade—when one of our pals has gone wrong? Such things happen in all classes, you know. Well, we never let him go to court. Never! The judge is bound to be ruled not by feelings of humanity, but by the letter of the law."

"The whole thing is enough to give one the pip!" exclaimed Auntie Lena.

"It is indeed!" agreed Balle, and proceeded to explain how among cattle-dealers a delinquent was smuggled over the frontier. "And that is why I agree with Ernemann," he concluded. "Away to Denmark! In the circumstances it is the only safe thing to do, for although he is innocent appearances are against him. And we shall smuggle him across the frontier sandwiched between our calves and bullocks. That much at least I am prepared to do, Auntie Lena, with all due respect."

Meanwhile Ernemann had fallen asleep. Auntie Lena did not stir; great tears were rolling down her cheeks on to his hair. Eva went up to her, and they talked for a few moments.

Then Eva made a sign to us and we followed her into another room. There she informed us that she feared for Ernemann's reason if he were arrested, and therefore, intolerable as the thought was to her, she agreed to Balle's plan.

We arranged the flight for the next day and discussed all the details. But in the hope that, at the eleventh hour, it might be unnecessary, I insisted on going to see Hellebeck by the next train, to try to arrange matters, and left my friends in Balle's charge.

After a good hour's journey by train I reached the little town, and walked the rest of the way.

. . . . .

It was the middle of April, and the fields were green with new corn. The woods to the right as well as on the valley side also showed a shimmer of green through the vernal mist that covered the ground. In the distance, on the edge of the ravine facing the wood, I could see the dilapidated straw thatch of the mean little farmhouse which was Hans's property, and I thought with emotion of my first visit there. Then I remembered the unhappy people, so dear to my heart, for whom I had undertaken this mission, and striding along the highway I reached the farm in under half an hour.

As I entered the large hall, with its tall massive cupboards, old Frau Hellebeck was just coming downstairs. Being short-sighted, she did not recognize me at once, and, taking me for some unwelcome intruder, looked at me with such strange indifference that I felt how cold at heart she really was.

When she came nearer and recognized me her carefully tended face softened, and she showed every sign of delight.

"Oh," she cried, with all her old affability, "my dear good old Babendiek! But what a pleasure! What an honour for our house!"

I blushed at her fulsome welcome, and protested that I failed to see where the honour came in.

"Oh, but it does," she rejoined, "when a clever, smart young student comes to see us simple country folk. . . ."

When I told her how I was actually employed she was disappointed, but patted me on the shoulder and observed that even journalism was a distinguished calling.

She then informed me that her "dear good Fritz" was very busy. What with the extension of the property, his corn business, financial concerns, and his various honorary duties, he was hardly ever at home. But "dear good old thing" that I was, I, of course, knew his brilliant gifts. Unfortunately there had been that distressing affair with his young assistant—and she pretended suddenly to remember that I knew his family. As for "dear sweet sunny Almut," I would now be able to see her as a mother! It was "the most beautiful and moving spectacle."

Although I knew that more than half she said was empty chatter I could not help being infected by her overwhelming good cheer, and in low eager tones I inquired after Hans.

A shadow seemed to flit across her smooth features, though she was soon smiling again. "Dear good old Hans," she said, stroking my arm, "has, between ourselves, grown rather queer—the dear good fellow. But he sees it; oh, he sees it himself. You see he has such a deep and touching affection for his step-brother."

Although it distressed me to hear that Hans was queer, the merry mood with which she had infected me inclined me to banter, and I asked: "What about Sören? does he still stare at you with his one eye as if—as if he wanted to ask you something?"

I distinctly saw her start, and in trying to mend matters I only made them worse. "Honestly though," I said, "he always seems to be trying to catch your eye."

"There may be something in what you say," she replied, pulling herself together. "Good old Sören! Who can tell what's in the mind of a simple fellow like that!" Then, pointing to Almut, who was outside bending over a perambulator, she bade me go to her, and left.

For a few moments I watched Almut fondling and kissing her baby, and was conscious of the reawakening of my old love, or, rather, admiration, for her. I could not refrain from joyfully contemplating the charming picture, and was uplifted by its beauty and the old memories that it brought to my mind. Then I went up to her.

She was delighted to see me, and pressing my hand repeated my name two or three times in her old singsong voice. But she showed nothing more than friendliness towards me, and seemed completely absorbed in her baby, though she spoke kindly and appreciatively of Fritz, who, she said, was very good to her, and used other expressions about him strangely reminiscent of her mother-in-law. It seemed as if the older woman had so schooled and trained her mind that she had not yet looked at the world with her own eyes.

With great delight she assured me that her baby could already recognize Hans; then her face suddenly clouded and she declared that she really did not know what had come over Hans. Ever since that unhappy Ernemann affair he had been different and depressed. Surmising that I must have come about this matter, she begged me to go to Hans and ask him, from her, what was the meaning of the change that had come over him. She could not bear to see him so sad.

Fritz arrived on the scene a moment later, and I accompanied him to his office.

His figure was more stately, his assurance had increased, and, in the full bloom of young manhood, he was all benevolence and affability. Evidently he guessed at once why I had come, and an expression of pained compassion entered his face. So great was his assurance, however, that even at that moment he could not refrain from opening the conversation by boastfully enumerating his hundred and one engagements, and saying I was lucky to find him at home.

But I saw nothing wrong in this. On the contrary, ever since my childhood I had regarded it as only right that he should talk in this strain, and loved him as I had always done.

I told him why I had come. His expression grew more pained than ever, and shaking his fine head gravely he exclaimed: "The poor parents! . . . And that boy, with his life ruined at one stroke! But that kind of thing happens so often with young people. They want to be rich all at once!"

Having no gift for generalization, I did not argue the point, but told him how desperate was the situation of Ernemann's family, reminding him that they were the most respected people in Ballum.

He shook his head mournfully.

I was moved by his sympathy, and immediately entered a plea on their behalf. I assured him that neither I nor anyone else could believe that Ernemann had taken the money. It was not in his nature to do such a thing. And other people, honest, intelligent people, who had spoken to him, had formed the same impression.

He smiled sadly. "Impression, dear Babendiek? What is an impression worth?"

I became uneasy, as I always did in his presence. "Tell me," I said, "was there no one besides yourself in the place when Ernemann went to fetch his hat?"

"He went out to fetch his coat and I followed him," he replied with perfect calmness and composure.

"And no one else was anywhere near?"

"No, no one," he said sadly.

I began to argue. Didn't it seem absurd, assuming he intended to take the money, that he should have delivered the other things? Would it not have been easier to say he had lost the whole case?

He seemed to start, and a second later his handsome face was filled with an expression of such haughty malevolence that for the first time it struck me as being faintly repulsive. "Forgive me, Babendiek," he said, "I confess I haven't gone very deeply into the matter, but you may be right."

I replied that I could well understand how distasteful the whole business, including my importunities, must be to him, but begged him to remember that the people concerned were the friends I held dearest in the world. And I proceeded to tell him about our idea of restoring the money and of Ernemann's attitude to the plan, which only confirmed our belief in his innocence.

The smile had vanished from his face and a look of dignified displeasure had taken its place. He pointed out that these were surely arguments to be presented to the police, or to the jury who tried the case. For, if he knew anything about the world, Ernemann was certainly the thief.

His dignity oppressed me. I could say no more, and pleaded that I must be making my way back.

He expressed regret at my having to leave, assured me with all his old friendliness that I should always be welcome, and told me that if I wished to see Hans I would find him in the stables or out in the fields.

I found him in the fields. His head was bowed and his long plain face seemed longer than ever. His clothes were very shabby, and looked inadequate for his work out of doors, and he strode along head foremost, as if he were lost in thought and wrapped in a cloak of loneliness.

He looked alarmed when he saw me, as if the weight that bowed him down had suddenly grown heavier.

He said that he had been thinking of me ever since the previous day, and, pointing to a wall, added that if I would take shelter beneath it against the wind we might have a talk.

Without any preamble he informed me that Ernemann had come back in the night and that he had heard him pleading with Fritz, under Fritz's window; that he had gone down and had the whole affair explained to him in the office by Fritz himself.

I asked him what impression he had formed of Ernemann. "Did he take the money?" I asked.

He shook his head.

I asked him what he thought about the matter.

He looked on the ground, then sighed so deeply that it sounded like a desperate groan.

I was startled. He had grown pale, his hands were shaking, and his lips quivered. I began to doubt whether he were sane. "What's the matter, Hans, my dear fellow?" I cried. "Tell me, if you can." I suspected nothing—nothing!

I begged him to wait till he had recovered a little, and noticed that his pale brow was covered with sweat.

Slowly he began to speak. "He was about ten years old," he said, "when one Sunday morning I went down towards the river, where a neighbour owned two fish ponds. Through the bushes I saw Fritz lifting the sluice of the ponds to let the water out. His playmate, the son of a labourer, who was standing a little way off, warned him and told him to stop. But he took no notice, and raised the sluice higher, while his companion ran away in a panic. I could not stop, because a goat had broken loose. But at dinner-time I heard that the owner of the fish ponds had complained of damage to his property, and Fritz had sworn it was not he but his playmate who had opened the sluice. I looked for him and asked him about it. I was astonished by what I had heard, but imagine my surprise when he described to me in great detail how his playmate had tried to persuade him to open the sluice, how he had refused, and how the other boy had crept up to the sluice, looked round and opened it. He told me everything with an air of such truthfulness and indignation. But he pleaded for his friend and begged me to see that he was not punished too severely! . . . I listened, thinking I must have seen spirits that morning—I was only a youngster! . . . But now . . ."

My heart stood still. "Hans . . . Hans!" I cried, covering my face with my hands. "It's impossible! Impossible!"

"I went with little Ernemann into the office," he added, breathing heavily, "and there Fritz behaved in exactly the same way. . . . He accused him, but in the kindest possible way."

I could picture the scene—Fritz Hellebeck, calm, dignified, and gentlemanly, secretly putting his hand into the case. My head swam. "Impossible! Impossible!" I exclaimed once more.

"I imagine that for some reason or other he needed the money," Hans continued, in his fine singsong voice, "and sacrificed Ernemann just as he once sacrificed his little playmate." Then suddenly bowing his head and covering his face with his hands, he groaned: "And I loved him more than anything in the world! Even now I cannot tear him from my heart! If only I could! But for Almut's sake, I can't, I can't! How could Almut have married such a scoundrel!"

I tried to persuade him that he was wrong. Then suddenly I too groaned aloud, for I remembered my own experience at Fritz's hands and was horrified. So far had I been from harbouring such a suspicion that it only occurred to me now. It was Fritz who had taken the money from my uncle's desk; and driven me to the verge of despair. And he had always been outwardly kind to me!

I was so completely taken aback that I was tongue-tied.

At last, stammering and with great difficulty, I framed the words, and told Hans the whole story. When I had finished we were silent.

After a while we discussed what we should do. I was in favour of confronting Fritz with his lies, and accusing him of the theft there and then.

But Hans had thought it all out, and dissuaded me. It would be useless. Fritz would merely shrug his shoulders and exclaim: "Conjecture! Mere conjecture!" I could see it all, and could picture his assurance and his air of honest conviction.

Then, laying his heavy brown hand on my arm, Hans added: "Even if you could do it . . . I could not . . . on account of her."

"But ought we to sacrifice that poor fellow Ernemann for her?" I protested uneasily. "I can't, much as I love her. But what can I do?"

"Her whole life," he replied, "has been faith and trust in Fritz and his mother. She lives in a dream. She knows nothing of men and the world. If you went to her and told her the truth she would go mad. We must not disturb her dream. We must be kind to those he has injured. We must also hope that Almut will die, so that we can track him down and corner him. For he has not finished yet . . . he will do more things of the same kind."

When we reached the farm it was just supper-time, and, except for the Dean, we were the same company who had sat down to table fifteen years previously.

God knows with what a heavy heart I took my seat at Almut's side, while opposite me sat the man whom, until an hour or two previously, I had regarded as a paragon. But I was amazed at Hans's self-control. What a power of dissimulation resides in the breast of the thorough-bred Low Saxon!

Almut remarked anxiously that he did not look well. He replied that he was suffering from a complaint inherited from his grandfather, who had nevertheless lived to a great age. He even had the courage to speak to Fritz about the farm. But his pent-up emotion had to find a vent, and turning to Sören he remarked with flashing eyes: "All the time we've been talking you have been staring at my step-mother as if you wanted her to tell you something. . . . What is it you want to find out?"

"Have I?" the man rejoined, trying to smile. "You've said that once before."

"Yes," Hans continued in his singsong voice, "you gaze at her as though you had not been paid your last week's wages."

Sören looked into Hans's face, and possibly because he saw the fire or the madness that gleamed in his watchful eyes, he rose and went out.

"My dear good little Almut," cried Frau Hellebeck with a smile, "just listen to Hans! A moment ago you said he looked ill. But it strikes me that our dear good Hans is quite roguish to-day!"

Fritz, who had taken no notice of all this, looked at me and observed: "I hope, dear Babendiek, that next time you come it will be on a more pleasant errand."

But I could not endure his noble features and his dignified voice any longer. Pleading a headache, I begged to be excused, and springing to my feet shook hands with everybody, even with him.

They all accompanied me to the door, and I went out into the night alone.

CHAPTER XVII

A Double Farewell

BEFORE dawn I had reached the little Schleswig station where I had arranged to meet my friends, and, going inside, did not at first see them. At last I found them in the bare and gloomy waiting-room. Auntie Lena was sitting in a dark corner, with her eyes starting out of her head and great tears trickling down her cheeks; she had Ernemann on her lap. Eva was standing in front of them, probably to shield them from prying eyes; but as soon as she saw who it was she came forward to greet me and ask me how I had fared.

I told her that I had been unsuccessful, and again questioned Ernemann about everything that had happened. But he could tell me nothing fresh. Anxious to discover whether he himself harboured any suspicions, I inquired with a beating heart: "Do you think it would have been possible during the few seconds before he followed you into the lobby for Fritz to have taken the money out of the case?"

He shook his head emphatically. "Impossible!" he cried. "And anyhow Hellebeck would never do such a thing! Besides, there was no time."

"Even if you don't think him capable of such a thing, Ernemann, I do!" Eva exclaimed, her eyes flashing.

I said I agreed with Ernemann, though the sweat broke out on my brow as I spoke. "In any case," I added, "we can do nothing for the moment, even if Hellebeck did take it. But this I promise you, Ernemann—I will leave no stone unturned to bring the truth to light."

Touching my arm, Eva led me outside and explained that both she and her mother had come to the conclusion that not only would she have to accompany her brother to the boat, but that she might also have to go all the way.

I was dumbfounded. I could not believe it. What would the house be without her!

"I am quite free," she said, bowing her head. "I have got over all that business with Eilert, especially during the last few weeks. I am free to go where I please. What harm will it do me to spend six months or a year or even longer in America?" Then suddenly flinging her arms round my neck she gave way to heartbreaking sobs as she smothered me with kisses.

Quite beside myself, I interpreted her kisses as a farewell to the home she loved so dearly. "Why, you're homesick already, Eva!" I exclaimed in deep distress. "Some people can wander over the face of the earth, but not you!"

"I will come back," she said, "and that thought will help me to bear up. Meanwhile you must be her son, Holler, in spite of your *fiancée* and your new parents. Be her son till I and possibly Ernemann come back. I love you like a brother . . . but . . ."—and here she smiled tearfully—"differently from Ernemann, because you are so serious and almost like a man."

I behaved very foolishly. I felt no pride at her embrace; I did not even suspect that she loved me. I looked upon her as a full-grown woman, and myself as still a youth.

At last Balle appeared. Never had he seemed to me more sincere and unassuming than he did that night in that dirty little station in Southern Schleswig. His shirt was old and grimy, his cap little better than a disgusting rag, his fringe was down almost to his eyes, and he carried a bundle under his arm. He nodded as he passed, went into the waiting-room, and then took Ernemann with him. We followed close on their heels, stumbling over the metals in the dark, until we reached a truck from which came the faint odour and stir of cattle.

Auntie Lena was breathing heavily, and I was on the point of urging her to return to the waiting-room when Ernemann appeared at the door of the truck. He was dressed as a drover, and seemed quite at ease even in that disguise. "Mother," he said in a shaky voice, "you know I did not do it?"

"We all know it, Ernemann," I replied. "You need have no fears about that. We don't for a moment believe you did it."

He knelt down in the doorway to give his mother a last embrace.

She stroked and kissed him. "I know a good deal about men and their filthiness, Ernemann," she observed with wonderful composure. "They will try to make you filthy too. Don't do as they do. Whether you are well, sick or dying, let people about you do what they like . . . but believe in the good and do it!"

He sobbed on her breast once more, and held her so tightly that she had to tear herself forcibly away. Then she turned her back on him and returned to the station.

Eva and I walked to and fro for a while, and when her train came in we shook hands and parted. I had one more look at the dear boy's charming head. In what strange surroundings was I to see it again six years later! I also saw Eva's bright face at the window. Then they both vanished in smoke, and the train was gone.

An hour later Auntie Lena and I were on our way to Ballum. I remember nothing about this journey, except that she sat silently looking out of the window, while tear after tear rolled down her cheeks.

We reached Ballum at about eleven in the morning, and found Uncle Gosch in his little study behind the dining-room.

When he first saw me he did not quite know what to make of things. But he was very pleased, and asked me one or two questions about Pytheas, at which he had hinted in his last letters. It was only when he looked into his wife's face that he remembered his children and what had happened. Auntie Lena, who was exhausted, had dropped into a chair. I told him all that had taken place, and he listened quietly, with an air of utter helplessness, as though he were at a loss to know what to say or do. But when I assured him that we were all convinced that Ernemann was innocent he drew himself up, and his childlike eyes grew brighter.

"Then what is there to be miserable about?" he cried, clasping my arm. "Why should I be cast down? And even if he did take the money, after all he is my child. It is always possible for a young man to steady himself after a slip. As for Eva, she's the bravest of the brave, dear Babendiek, and could undertake the most difficult geological or historical research with him!" And he beamed as he looked at me. "Yes," he added, "I have very good children, and all the good that is in them they get from their mother."

But Auntie Lena, stretching out her arms, fell on her knees before him, crying bitterly: "From me? From me? I am to blame for everything. I have been dancing on a tight-rope and making him dance with me. I am the biggest fool on earth!"

He tried to comfort her, but she would not listen. "No, no," she sobbed, "I am to blame. All that is good in my children they get from you, and all the bad from me. I am to blame for everything!"

Again he protested and tried to comfort her, appealing to me to support him. "And now stand up, my love," he said, turning to her again, "or I shall be obliged to kneel beside you and bow lower than you."

Later in the day, after a large sewing-party, at which Auntie Lena had defended her shaken prestige before her guests, she asked me to help her prepare supper and accompany her to Aunt Sarah's party afterwards.

"Why, Auntie Lena," I protested anxiously, "you did not have any sleep last night, and you cannot possibly enjoy it. Why not go to bed early instead?"

She looked at me out of the corner of her eyes, and replied haughtily: "I shall take a little nap after supper, and then we shall go. That's what I used to do in the old days."

"But, Auntie Lena," I urged, "how can you and I mix with those people in our present mood?"

Again she looked at me sideways. "What do you suggest, then?" she exclaimed, with kindly assurance. "How long must I remain in hiding and give up looking after the poor and the aged? A month? Don't talk nonsense! Just remember the great door of your forge and the balcony over it, which was always full of smoke, my dear boy, instead of criticizing other people! . . . Or do you always want to stalk about on high bunskins?"

"*Buskins*, not bunskins, Auntie Lena!" I rejoined. "They are a sort of half-boot with high . . ."

"Oh, well, it's all the same thing. Old Peter Steffensen . . . but you didn't know him, did you? . . . he used to come out with the same kind of mistake. He always said Maxbeth instead of Macbeth. But he managed to do well in life, all the same, and he was given a very fine tombstone too. It's the third in the row of dead pastors."

I smiled, but said nothing.

We prepared the supper together, I laying the cloth and carrying the dishes, as I had done when I was a child. An hour later we left the house for the party.

It was about nine o'clock when Uncle Gosch, Auntie Lena, and I arrived at the Mumms'; supper was over, and the company were standing about the hall and the dining-room. Ever since the unfortunate incident with Eilert these gatherings had been less crowded and brilliant, while many of the older generation had either died or else were too far advanced in years to attend. Barbara was the first to come up to us and greet me. I saw from her expression that she had heard everything, probably from her mother, and that the case had been presented in the blackest colours. Nevertheless she was brave and honest enough to look us straight in the face and be friendly to us. Dutti, in the smartest of dinner-jackets and patent-leather shoes, came up, and immediately clasping me in his arm whispered something which I did not catch.

Sarah Mumm, who made an effort to control herself, exclaimed: "I did not think you would come."

"And why not, Sarah?" Auntie Lena rejoined in her sweetest, liveliest tones. "Haven't you trouble with your own child, and yet you invite people to your house? . . . Why isn't the old Councillor here?"

"Come . . . that's rather different!" my aunt retorted with a stony stare. "After all, my son would never have done what yours has!"

"Oh, Sarah," cried Auntie Lena, "don't talk like that, for heaven's sake! What on earth do you know about your son? Even as a child he used to come and put his head in my lap and not in yours."

Sarah Mumm winced. "Yes, that's been your way all through!" she returned. "You always draw everything to yourself. Ever since we were children everything has always belonged to you!"

And she proceeded to take Auntie Lena to task for buying her wool from Uhle Monk.

"I buy it from her," Auntie Lena retorted, "because she is a charitable creature, and lets me and my mothers have it at wholesale price. You can come with me, if you like, and all the mothers as well, and if Uhle Monk's isn't the cheapest we can buy it elsewhere."

"The Mothers' Union should not buy things from such people," retorted Aunt Sarah. "But there, you always were drawn to the crooked things of this world!"

"Yes, my dear," Auntie Lena replied, loud enough for every one to hear, "that's true! I and God Almighty—or, rather, God Almighty and I—have always had a weakness for crooked things. But that hardly applies to Uhle Monk, for she's got the straightest, slimmest legs in the whole town. That you must admit!"

This brought Sarah Mumm back to the subject of Ernemann, and she informed us that she knew everything. "Your boy robbed his employer and tried to set fire to the house," she said, "and now your daughter has gone too far with some man, and has had to fly too!"

"Yes, Sarah," Auntie Lena replied, in her rich, vibrant voice, "that's just like the Ohlens"—Ohlen was my aunt's maiden name—"two of your ancestors were murderers. They did not know what they were doing when they were in a rage. That's the stuff you're made of!"

We left early, and Auntie Lena was in the best of spirits.

. . . . .

Very little happened in the eight months that elapsed before my marriage, except that throughout that period I enjoyed Gesa's company.

I used to go to see her at Övelgönne. She was always in her green jumper—it was the only one she had—with her red-gold curls about her brow and a scull in her cold blue hands. She was always either just going for a sail or just coming back from one.

I told her all I had been through. Her sympathy was touching. She wanted to help me and take my mind off the two old people in Ballum and the two fugitives across the Atlantic. She recommended sailing. If I went sailing often enough, she declared, I would recover my spirits. She was convinced that no illness on earth could survive a course of sailing. I was only too ready to try her remedy, and so a-sailing we went!

As she was attending to the tiller and the sails she would talk about the wind, the air, sailing-ships, and boats. And I willingly joined in. But, truth to tell—yes, truth to tell—I was interested in other things. I tried to lead the conversation on to more human topics, but it was no good. Gesa's face would only cloud over, and she would look confused and a little bit homesick. No—it was no good. And so we hoisted the sail, and sped before the wind. After all, why should I not afford her this little pleasure? Was not her love for the beautiful broad Elbe most touching? Wherefore avaunt, all ye human interests—away like a flock of swallows! How sweet it was to sit by her side, talking of the Elbe and of sailing! My eyes, drunk with love, doubtless flashed fire, and when they met her beautiful shy glance what bliss it was! I would lay my hand gently on hers, but our eyes would immediately turn away from each other, and she would heave a deep sigh. And, oh! the timid stormy kisses at the door of her house at night! Could anything have been more entrancing? I was bursting with joy!

Did I really live in Altona? Was I breathing the same air as my fellow-men? Did I notice the rain or the fog, or Frau Eckmüller's suspicious questions every night when I got home, because she thought I was in love, and did not like the idea? No, no! I was conscious only of the sunshine and the wind, white sails, and innocence all about me!

I really do not know what would have become of me that year if I had not had to think of those two dear old people in Ballum, the beloved fugitives, and my work on my novel!

But I needed money. I was in love, and I had to write to make money. Gesa had informed me in her straightforward way that although it was true her father had a fine boat and a becoming cap with a gold shield on it, he had little besides. So I wanted money. Money!

I made up my mind to write a long novel—nothing very wonderful. What right had I to suppose I could write anything wonderful? Before I could become an artist with my pen I felt I had a long way to go. Had I not spent my life in surroundings utterly devoid of art, ignorant of the very word? And had I not received many a hard knock, even as a child?

But I had read the great authors. Possibly I had studied those to whom I was most closely related, and raised myself on their shoulders. This idea never occurred to me. Moreover I never believed myself capable of powerful original creations. So I adopted a different plan. I knew a few novels which were popular among ordinary people, and decided to use them as models.

I did not feel very confident. All I wanted was to write an interesting story—something that Frau Eckmüller and Gesa's mother might like to read, and that a newspaper would buy, so that I might get a new suit for my wedding, a bed, a writing-table, and a kitchen cupboard. Gesa told me that her mother read Marlitt, and I knew that Frau Eckmüller read Captain Marryat. For a long time I wavered between Marlitt and Marryat. I was anxious to write a story that would please my revered and beloved mother-in-law. On the other hand, the foreman printer of my paper had been ten years a miner in the Rockies, and was able and willing to answer all my questions on the subject. True, I had a feeling that he embroidered a little, and that I should have to read up a good deal about those parts; but at last I decided in favour of Marryat and the foreman printer. The plot hinged on the search for a valuable copper-mine and the struggle for the possession of it.

My days were fairly full. In the mornings the newspaper; in the afternoons and evenings Övelgönne; at night the copper-mine!

I was amazed by the amount of time Gesa always seemed to have at her disposal. She had no ties! Whenever I turned up, there she was, ready. The only question was, whither? How we sailed! I knew every inch of the river as far as Finkenwärder and Wedel, every tree and every hut.

Sometimes I would pause during my night work, and dwell on the future. I would picture a little room, with a writing-table, at which I was seated, while Gesa could be heard busy in the kitchen. Then she would appear with the supper, and I would yawn and heave a sigh of delight. This sigh would bring me back to reality, to the copper-mine, and I would plunge back into work.

Although I was able to conceal my love-affair from Frau Eckmüller I was not so successful with regard to my novel, for the simple reason that I burned such an unconscionable amount of oil. She began to question me. I had to confess. I had to tell her about my novel and keep her informed as to its progress. She grew more and more inquisitive and critical, and often I had to fight tooth and nail to continue the narrative as I thought fit.

Yes, they were troublous days! I did not stop from morning to night. I never walked, but always ran! I was anxious, too, about Gesa . . . her boat seemed to me too small for the treacherous Elbe. Moreover, I was concerned about the characters in my novel. I felt every one of their emotions. I burned, wept, laughed, and burned again with all of them. I grew thin. Oh, but I was so happy! I was happy about everything.

When a longer and deeper acquaintance with my characters convinced me that they were losing their angularity, and gradually becoming genuine human beings, I gained courage, and even had the boldness to ask Gesa to introduce me to her people.

After having pictured them in my imagination all this time, I was at last to know them!

Her mother was sitting by the window in the parlour in front of a little bolster-cushion covered with coloured needles, and seemed to be engaged in throwing a number of little wooden sticks at this inanimate porcupine. I had never seen lace being made before, but assumed that the dignified dame was engaged in some kind of fancy-work. She was as different as possible from her daughter—tall, emaciated, dark, and somewhat awkward and stiff, though her soft, brown childlike eyes were full of kindness and confidence. She sat very upright, and was extremely friendly to me, asking me all kinds of questions. Gesa had perched herself on an arm of the sofa, and had begun to make herself a white cotton frock. Although I knew but little about such matters, it struck me that she was making incredibly large stitches. Moreover, she had a peculiar unbalanced way of sitting, as if she were on the thwart of a boat or on the rail of a bridge, expecting every moment to have to move. She never looked up, but sat there diligently putting in the huge stitches.

Her mother told me about her children. Her eldest, Hieronymus, "a fine fellow," was apparently an accountant at a "large millboard factory" in Glückstadt.

Quite by chance I happened to know that this factory was in reality a small one, but I said nothing, because both mother and son were related to the beautiful creature perched on the arm of the sofa.

"Yes," continued Frau vom Gang, "I am only too glad to answer questions about my Hieronymus. When he was only seventeen he was already a competent business man, and had made such a favourable impression on the head of the firm and his wife that they wanted him to marry their daughter. But my Hieronymus could not bring himself to love her."

I expressed my regard for the man, allowing his sister to stand proxy for him as the object of my admiring gaze.

Feeling my eyes upon her, she looked up, and I saw that she was amused. At what? At me? Or at her mother's praise of Hieronymus?

Meanwhile Frau vom Gang had begun to describe her second son, Adalbert—what a perfect name!—who was an official at the Town Hall in Hamburg.

I knew at once, of course, that a man who bore the name of Adalbert vom Gang, and who had such a mother and sister, could be no ordinary clerk. So it did not surprise me to hear that he was the mayor's right hand.

"Ah, he could reveal a few things, if he liked!" exclaimed Frau vom Gang.

I observed that he naturally did not do so, as his work was very confidential.

"Quite so," she replied. "He sits in one room and the mayor in the next, and the mayor discusses everything first with Adalbert. It is very strenuous work. So strenuous, indeed, that when I can I give him half a bottle of port to take with him for lunch."

I did not doubt it, and tried to catch my beloved's eye, to show her how great was my admiration for her brother Adalbert.

Again she looked up and again I noticed in the depths of her eyes that suggestion of amusement which I could not understand.

Still making a faint clatter with her wooden needles, her mother then proceeded to tell me about her third son, Eusebius.

How priceless! Eusebius vom Gang! A name that would carry a man anywhere!

Apparently, although he was only seventeen, he knew he was the most gifted of the family, and was thus a cause of great anxiety to the business world of Hamburg.

"A cause of great anxiety?" I repeated faintly.

"Yes, indeed! His uncle, who owns seven square miles in furthest Ind, wants him to go out there, so of course he will be lost to the business world of Hamburg!"

Then followed a description of this uncle, and of how he would one day either write or come over in person, and shower his wealth upon the whole family. Think what that meant—seven square miles! It would mean great changes, great changes, she said with a sigh.

I cast a covert glance round the room, and noticed that it was certainly scantily, not to say poorly, furnished. It would indeed mean great changes!

I was invited to look at his photograph on the chest of drawers. It seemed to have been taken a long while ago, but I gazed at it with the deepest reverence, for what if he were to write or arrive on the scene the next day! Again I tried to catch my beloved's eye, and again I perceived the twinkle of amusement in it. Was she laughing at her mother, her brothers, her uncle, at me, or at all of us?

I then implored Frau vom Gang to tell me something about Gesa. Incidentally, what a beautiful name—Gesa vom Gang! How distinguished! How wooden and sinister my name sounded by comparison!

She opened with the superfluous remark that Gesa was extremely gifted, though not at school-work—she was quite ready to admit that!

"Please don't be afraid to, Mother," came a voice from the sofa, "I am not at all ashamed of it."

"But she is wonderfully gifted at sewing and cleaning. . . . Ever since she was thirteen she has made all her own clothes!"

"That's quite true," said the girl, in her clear voice that seemed to mock even herself, "and I'm proud of it."

"Unfortunately," the mother continued, "she is always on the Elbe, though sailing too is a great art!"

"And that's true too!" again cried the clear voice from the sofa.

I could not help being struck by her tone. Was all that had been said before not true then? I tried to catch Gesa's eye, and when I did so, lo and behold! the look of amusement had vanished, and it was calm and clear. "And now that's enough about me, Mother," she said. "Herr Babendiek has very good eyes; he can see what we are."

I cast an admiring glance at her, and she returned it; her eyes filled with shy joy, and she bowed her head low over her work.

How happy I was! I loved her madly, and loved everything belonging to her. Why? Why were all her relations so wonderful? Because the most charming girl in the world must be given a suitable frame. Therefore her frame was wonderful!

Frau Eckmüller still suspected nothing about my romance. I had enough worries without that! But Fräulein Butenschön knew, and she scoffed at both Sooth and myself. A week later I paid Gesa's people a second visit. It was on the occasion of some public holiday—but I was too much preoccupied to know that.

Soon after my arrival her father came in—short and erect, in his smart blue yachting suit, with his gold embroidered cap on his white hair. He had just returned from taking the chair at a meeting of the Chicken Breeders' Club.

He laughed when I asked him about his chickens. He had none! Why should he be bothered? The others had the chickens; he had the Club. Splendid!

We met Gesa's mother coming from the kitchen, where apparently she had washed up without anyone to help her; and, assuring Herr vom Gang that I was now one of the family, she proceeded to ask him whether he could let her have some money.

The domestic economy expert looked uncomfortable. "Isn't the bank account all right, then?" he inquired.

"No," she replied, gazing at him with her kindly, attractive, childlike eyes, "it is not! Unfortunately," she added, turning to me with a smile, "my husband is not very good at domestic matters, but then he is interested in mankind as a whole!"

Feeling that I ought to encourage this interest, I turned to face him, when to my surprise he looked at me with an amused smile and gave me a surreptitious wink. I smiled back, though I was completely mystified.

Meanwhile Frau vom Gang had begun to read a letter that had just arrived from Hieronymus. Apparently his rooms were infested with bugs, and he felt he must move, but could not do so as he still owed a little rent. "If you would be so good as to set the bank account right," said Frau vom Gang to her husband, "I could send him some money."

I was surprised that the accountant of the great millboard factory should be in such a plight, suffering from vermin and in arrears with his rent, and I cast a look of dumb inquiry at Herr vom Gang. The latter, pushing his cap on one side—he wore it even indoors—said he would write to his son.

Soon afterwards Adalbert, the Town Hall official and the mayor's right hand, turned up. We shook hands, and he was exceedingly affable. I had to repeat my name twice; for he explained that in the course of the day he heard so many names that he had great difficulty in remembering them. Then he asked me what I did.

On hearing that I was a sub-editor, he remarked that it was, of course, a subordinate post, but no doubt it was only a stepping-stone to something better. He had a friend who, although he was only twenty-five, was already an editor-in-chief, but he could not think of his name. Those wretched names!

I chanced to catch his father's eye at this moment, and noticed that he was winking at me and smiling faintly. I could not make it out! Evidently his family's little boasts amused him. He probably smiled at their exaggerations—their slight exaggerations. And Gesa was her father's child, and smiled in the same way! . . . How charming!

Presently Eusebius, the youngest, appeared—the one who was waiting for his Indian uncle with the seven square miles. He gave me a silent nod when I was introduced, and sitting down by the window looked out into the back garden.

His mother was radiant. She was evidently happy at having such contented, intelligent children, who congregated round her on Sundays, and asked Eusebius with a laugh where he had been the previous night.

The young man turned his pale face round, and, looking imploringly at his mother with eyes just like her own, made no reply.

She gazed anxiously at him. "You ought not to work so hard at that Chinese!" she observed. Then turning to me she explained that unfortunately—or, rather, God be praised!—her sons were regular demons for work, and that Eusebius worked so hard at that wretched Chinese, particularly the script, that in the morning he was quite tongue-tied. But his uncle would be overjoyed to find he had already mastered the language when he arrived.

I was delighted, though my heart ached for the youth. I tried to convey these emotions to his father, but he simply made signs implying that the boy had spent the night smoking and drinking with friends, and winked at me as he had done before. Evidently the father knew a thing or two, although his wife was so credulous. But he did not wish to hurt her feelings. What wonderful parents! What material for a poet here!

Delighted as I was, however, I had, after all, come to see Gesa, and was growing impatient. On inquiring where she was, I was told that she was probably down on the river bank; so, bidding them farewell, I went there.

Yes, there she was, surrounded by a crowd of "boys," discussing sails and tackle. I saw at once from the light in her eyes how much more I meant to her than the others, but she begged me to wait about half an hour, after which she would go for a row with me.

I assured her that I was prepared to wait whole days and nights if necessary, and sat there devouring her every movement, and feeling in the seventh heaven when she vouchsafed me a glance.

We went for a row—I believe to Finkenwärder: but we loitered and talked a good deal on the way, forgetting our midday meal, and just nibbling at a little stale bread that we found in the boat. She said she often did not go home to lunch.

Night was falling, and we were still on the river, with our boat moored under a willow near Nienstedten. She let me kiss her and call her sweetheart. She was shy but trustful, quite trustful.

O limbs of ivory! O eyes like stars! O miracle of God!

CHAPTER XVIII

My Wedding

TOWARDS autumn I made a fair copy of about half my novel and submitted it to my chief. And I remember how intolerable were the days of waiting that followed, how I used to study his face when he arrived in the morning, to try to gather from the smallest sign what his opinion was likely to be. I began to be filled with the most agonizing doubts. Who up to that moment had known anything about the work or criticized it? Only Frau Eckmüller and myself! And were we competent judges? I could not help entertaining serious doubts about this, and blushed to myself.

I appealed to Fräulein Butenschön's aunt, gave her a detailed description of the plot, and asked her what she thought of it. Unfortunately it turned out that she never read novels, but only cookery-books, and very little of them, for she kept most of the recipes in her head!

And then a day or two later my kind chief informed me that if I finished the novel in the same style as I had begun it he would print it!

The moment my work at the office was over I flew to Övelgönne, persuaded that I should find Gesa busy at home, as it was about the middle of the day. I had never seen her engaged in domestic duties, and my imagination formed the most delightful pictures of her going about her housework in a large apron.

But when I arrived her mother, who was in the middle of turning out a room, informed me that Gesa was out sailing. The wind had been particularly favourable, and she had received a tempting invitation.

As I had heard the same tale both on the previous day and the day before, I asked Frau vom Gang with a smile—for I was naturally glad that Gesa should be enjoying herself—whether she always did all the housework.

Laying her hand on my arm, she smilingly replied that she had always left Gesa free to go where she liked. "Why should she be bothered with housework which her old mother can manage so well? Besides, one of these days her uncle will either write or come, and put all our affairs in order. So why should she bother?"

I felt tempted to tell her my wonderful news, but I had the feeling that it would hardly compete with the uncle from furthest Ind. So I said nothing, but went out along the river to wait for Gesa.

She soon appeared with her young companion, and seeing that I appeared to have something particular to tell her she quickly took leave of him and came towards me with a question in her eyes.

I told her the news—she did not even know that I was writing a novel—and added that, as we should now have some money to buy things, we might get married.

She looked overjoyed, but I felt that she was not quite clear about it all. It was difficult for her to imagine that money could be made out of imaginative work. I believe that all through our married life she regarded my novel-writing and the income I told her I earned by it in the same light as her mother's tales about the uncle from India, which neither she nor her father believed. But she was not the sort to give much thought to anything, and, what was more, she loved me and longed for nothing better than to settle down with me.

She led me away to the boat-house. I thought she wanted to show me a boat or a new sail or something. But when she had taken me where no one could see us she flung her arms round my neck and kissed me passionately.

What a marvellous thing is love! How it uplifts one and makes one reverence everything pure and sacred! I was twenty-three at this time, and was tasting love during the glorious hours of youth!

That night, after I had finished my task on the copper-mine, feeling I could neither work nor sleep for joy, I ran to Övelgönne again, so that I might gaze up at her window and put a halo about her with the power of my love and the glory of my imagination. And the next day, which was a Sunday, I broke the news to Paul Sooth.

He was sitting on the edge of his bed, looking terribly anxious and unhappy, and I asked him what was the matter.

Glancing towards the door, he implored me not to speak so loud, and then, with bated breath, informed me that he had unfortunately come to the conclusion that Fräulein Butenschön wanted to marry him. "Just imagine," he said, "she actually told me so to my face yesterday!"

We congratulated each other, and I suggested that we should be married on the same day. But he could not feel altogether happy. There were his brothers and sisters to think of, the youngest of whom, who was only ten, was being very badly treated by the peasants. And looking very miserable, he declared that he saw things very black indeed.

I asked him whether there was anything else that was depressing him.

"Think of it," he replied, speaking very low, "you know that Fräulein Butenschön gives her gymnastic lessons in tights? Well, last night she got into them and danced to me!"

I observed that I could see no harm in that, and regretted that Gesa could not do the same. But he pointed out that, being a country bumpkin, such a proceeding struck him as outrageous.

I tried to comfort him, and, when he had put on his coat, led him into the kitchen. But he still looked exceedingly blue.

When little Clara saw the face he was pulling, and had laughed heartily at him, I told her my joyful news. Whereupon she informed me that Paul Sooth also wished to marry at all costs, and had threatened her, with a knife in his hand, if she refused to go to the altar with him forthwith. As for his brothers and sisters, she had written to the eldest girl, telling her the news and asking her to come to Altona to see her.

While we were having breakfast together the old aunt came in with a card for Sooth from his eldest sister, saying that she would arrive at Altona on Sunday morning.

My old friend was dumb with despair, and mumbled something about the heavens falling in; but as a glance at the clock informed us that his sister would be arriving at that very moment we set off with all possible speed to the station.

But she was nowhere to be seen on any of the platforms, and Paul Sooth, knowing his family's peculiarities, suggested she might possibly be sitting in the darkest corner of the third-class waiting-room. And so thither we repaired, and did indeed find her—not, however, alone, but with all her five brothers and sisters! There they sat, each one simply but respectably clad, each wearing a hat a few sizes too large, waiting round a table that was perfectly bare.

Sooth sighed heavily, and addressing each in turn by name shook them all by the hand. Clara, who had never before felt so disinclined to laugh, gazed aghast at the little group of orphans round the table, and exclaiming "My God!" found difficulty in suppressing a sob.

We sat down with them while Sooth asked them all kinds of questions, and taking two baubles from his pocket placed them before the two youngest. There were three boys and three girls. Sooth asked them all about their food, their schools, their teachers, and their clothes, and became so deeply absorbed that he forgot we were there. He also made searching inquiries about the farmer who employed his brother of fifteen, and when he heard that the man was sometimes drunk he made careful notes in his pocket-book, with a view to framing a letter of complaint.

The wearing of hats several sizes too large for their heads seemed to be a family failing, and as Clara Butenschön glanced curiously from one to the other she was evidently utterly bewildered. At last, making a sign to the waiter, she ordered a huge pot of coffee and quantities of bread.

The eldest girl, who was somewhat sharp-featured, explained that she had brought the whole family in order that her brother might hear their objections, if they had any, to his marriage, and she concluded her little speech by informing him that the third girl must have a new dress for her confirmation.

Sooth made a further note, and said he would supply the dress.

Meanwhile the coffee and bread had arrived, and Clara, who, though she had recovered her spirits, was still unable to laugh, sat down surrounded by her prospective relations, and handing round the refreshments asked each one in turn whether he or she objected to Paul's marriage. They all remained very stiff and still; and one by one, like little judges, declared that it was all right, while my old friend followed their votes with the profoundest attention and concern.

A little while later we saw them into their train, and returned home. On the way Fräulein Butenschön and I discussed the arrangements for our joint wedding, and agreed to share the expenses of the wedding breakfast, which was to be at Steigelmeyer's in Övelgönne, according to the number of guests we invited.

During the next few days Gesa and I hunted for quarters. She suggested that we should buy the little boathouse which stood under the alders not far from her home, saying that the "boys" would make the trifling alterations required. When on the third day we had not found anything Gesa thought of an old fishing-boat which might suit our purpose, and I began seriously to consider building on my own account. But on the eighth day, just as we were on the verge of despair, I found, just below the church of a little village up-stream, a broken-down thatched cottage, which I immediately took. Gesa was delighted, because it commanded a view of the Elbe. She declared she could not sleep or eat out of sight of the Elbe.

I now became entirely absorbed in the little thatched cottage, and made all manner of purchases out of my slender means, walking about the empty rooms dreaming of the delightful scenes that would soon be enacted in them. Gesa, on the other hand, as soon as she knew that the Elbe was visible from our future home, lost all further interest in it, and began sailing as usual, either alone or with the "boys." When she was not sailing she would perch herself on the arm of the sofa at home and work at two shifts—certainly not more—which were to constitute her trousseau. As far as I was aware the whole of this work was done on the arm of the sofa, with those huge stitches she was so clever at making.

I was a little bit annoyed by her everlasting sailing and stitching. But what does happy and trustful youth care about little clouds on the horizon? We had eyes only for each other; and thus the weeks flew by.

There were some who declared that she had really given her heart to one of the "boys," and that she had had more than one admirer. They were mistaken. I knew enough about the human soul to distinguish truth from falsehood, and had no doubt that I had won her whole affection. I don't say that I was her first and only love. But what did that matter? I was content to know that from the moment she became mine she was wholly mine, body and soul. At that time I was her love, the strongest love of her life.

Or, at least, one of them. For there was another love stronger than the one I inspired, which ultimately won the day—her love for the Elbe and the breeze that rippled its surface.

But I did not know that at the time.

. . . . .

I begged Engel Tiedje and Auntie Siene to come to my wedding, but they refused. My Ballum family, however, accepted, and I went to meet them at the station on the afternoon before my marriage.

As I could not see them on the platform after the train had come in, I ran past the carriage doors to look for them. Suddenly the sound of much talking and laughing made me stop, and I caught sight of Auntie Lena, installed in all her glory, holding forth to a tightly packed audience, one member of which had actually crept into the luggage rack over her head. Uncle Gosch, on the other hand, with his blue cap on the back of his head and his glasses on, was reading a book. As he was nearest to me, I nudged him, and he looked up.

"My darling," he observed to Auntie Lena, "Diek is here. I take it we are in Altona; besides, the train has stopped."

"What!" they all cried in alarm, "is this Altona? Quick, get out, you fellows! . . . Good-bye, Auntie Lena!"

Auntie Lena would not let them go at once, but continued her conversation with the last speaker, chaffing him about the woman he would most probably marry. She then had a last word with one or two of the others. Meanwhile Uncle Gosch had returned to his book and was making copious notes.

At last she turned to him. "Come along, Gosch!" she cried. "Look! there is our boy, Otto Babendiek. He's going to be married!"

They all laughed and congratulated me, and Uncle Gosch, seizing a button of my coat, announced that there was good news from America. "They are both well and at work," he said, "Eva at a doctor's and Ernemann on the doctor's brother's apple-farm."

I was deeply moved. Eva was evidently keeping her brother near her so as to be able to help him. I expressed my delight at the news.

Then he rambled off on to the subject of Sven Modersohn and Pytheas, and described his opponent's ignominious retreat. "One strides more proudly over the earth, Diek," he said, "when one knows the great milestones of her history!"

"Gosch," cried Auntie Lena, as we reached the ticket-collector's barrier, "here's another milestone. Where are the tickets?"

He only looked bewildered, and asked what all the fuss was about. I saw that he was still in the clouds with Pytheas and his defeated antagonist. So I explained to him in great detail that he and Auntie Lena had just travelled from Ballum to Altona and that they must have had to buy two tickets for the journey. He listened eagerly, as though he were being given extremely interesting information. Then with a look of radiant joy he signified that he understood, and was in entire agreement with every word I had uttered. But it required a long search in all his pockets before we got on the track of the tickets, and it was only when Auntie Lena in her quiet way declared that she was convinced they could not be on his person that I thought of looking in the book he had been reading, where at last I found them being used as bookmarkers.

I was afraid that Frau Eckmüller, who had grown rather cold since my engagement, and had begun to neglect my room, might be rude to my guests; and, indeed, she was a little bit stiff at first and tried to play the heavy town-dweller towards country bumpkins. But as soon as Auntie Lena had spread herself out in a chair, and addressed her as "my dear," asked her about her troubles, and incidentally recommended valerian tabloids to her, she began to thaw and grow confiding. Soon they were both sobbing together, and it was only when, in the midst of her sobs, Auntie Lena happened to glance at me that she remembered I was to be married the next day. She immediately sprang to her feet, kissed me, and then proceeded to dance round the room with me.

When we were alone she told me how much she loved me, and looked at me so tenderly with her beautiful large eyes that I could not help dropping on my knees before her and kissing her hands. I was overwhelmed by the thought of all she had done for me, and by the idea that a stranger had just entered my life, who was as near—ay, even nearer—to me than she was.

She guessed what was going through my mind, and stroking my hair said softly: "We'll still be good friends, won't we? I never thought I should live to be so proud of you," she added, smiling through her tears; "but you looked such an odd little figure when I first saw you, with your great boots and your trousers tucked into them. You were about ten, I suppose."

Directly after lunch Sooth took my uncle to the Public Library, and Auntie Lena and I went to Övelgönne.

We found the whole family assembled, except Gesa, who was paying a visit to a friend. The two younger brothers were there—the Town Hall official and Eusebius, the budding business-man. The accountant, whom I had not yet met, was also present, having come over from Glückstadt for the wedding. To my surprise there was also another brother, the eldest, a broad-shouldered man with an open, smiling face, whose existence had been concealed from me, and who said that he had a little farm in East Holstein.

From the sofa Auntie Lena cast her great eyes from one to the other of the strangers about her, and I perceived for the first time what strange folk they were, and how poverty-stricken the room looked. When she had taken stock of the company, with a sure instinct she took my prospective mother-in-law's hand in hers, and, drawing her closer to her on the sofa, said: "I see, my dear, that things have not been easy for you. The others have been sitting and you have been standing. Come and sit by me for a bit!"

"I have a good husband," Frau vom Gang replied, gazing at her with her fine brown childlike eyes.

"So I see, my dear; but I can also see that he's not the stuff martyrs are made of!"

Herr vom Gang smiled at her. He was quite pleased to have been understood. "I have always striven for mankind in general," he observed, "and possibly my own house has suffered a little."

Auntie Lena told them a long story of a similar case. "But you might help your wife a little," she added. "Why not? It wouldn't hurt you." Then turning to Frau vom Gang she said kindly, "Four fine healthy boys, my dear. . . . I hope they are all doing well."

She replied that they were all good boys, and introduced each in turn, dismissing the eldest with a brief reference to his rustic occupation, and speaking in greater detail about the others.

Twice the eldest son, the farmer, interrupted her—once to express the hope that the accountant would find a good permanent job before long, and the second time to remind her that the youngest had not yet secured any paid employment, but was only a probationer.

"At any rate," replied his mother, "he is only waiting until his uncle in furthest Ind sends for him. He has a big business there—something connected with land and banking. I don't quite know what."

She wanted to say a good deal more about the Indian uncle, but at that moment Gesa appeared, and going up to Auntie Lena greeted her with the shy smile with which she always met strangers. Then, perching herself on the arm of the sofa, she seized a blouse, and set to work on it with her usual huge stitches.

Auntie Lena monopolized the conversation for a while, filling the whole room with her fine rich voice. When the farmer son got up, saying he had to go to Altona, Auntie Lena and I also took our leave and went with him, Gesa walking beside me with her arm linked in mine.

"Now tell me, my dear boy," said Auntie Lena to the farmer son, "how many of your family have your clear, wide-awake eyes? Your father and you have got them, but how many of the others?"

He smiled broadly. "And my little sister Gesa," he rejoined.

Auntie Lena smiled kindly at her. "I am glad, my child, for your sake as well as Holler's," she said. "But the others seem to be rather up in the clouds."

The farmer agreed. "They get it from mother," he explained.

Auntie Lena proceeded to discuss the father. She said she had heard that he did nothing but found one club after another, and observed that he would do better to build some ladders to bring his family down to earth.

The man smiled. "That's out of the question," he replied. "My father cares only about things outside the house, not about his family. He watches them as though they were a cage full of monkeys. I saw that as a boy, and left them as soon as I could."

Gesa was striding along at my side smiling happily. The conversation did not trouble her. She had seen what went on at close quarters ever since she was a child, and imagined that I saw it all as clearly as she did.

"I think the girl is a good sort," Auntie Lena observed in a low, emphatic whisper when they had left us.

"That's the main thing," I replied gratefully.

She agreed, but thought it a pity that I could expect no help from any of her family except the farmer son. "But you are bound to respect the mother, Diek," she added. "My God, what fools mothers are . . . even those who think themselves most intelligent!"

I knew she was thinking of herself, and that she was crying. "But Gesa is different," I said. "After all, I am only marrying her, not her family."

"Yes," she replied, "but marriage is not only love, Diek, but friendship. It is not all kisses; you must have some sort of order. Tell me, what is there deep down in her heart? What is her favourite occupation?"

I bit my lip and confessed I did not know.

"There is something," she continued, "but it's not housework, sewing, reading, jollification, or dancing. I saw it. There's some force behind her."

When I told her that Gesa loved sailing she exclaimed: "I see, I see! Then it will be a struggle between home and boating, and I hope home will win!"

"Auntie Lena," I observed after a while, "I have loved only two girls in my life—Eva and Gesa."

"Then why didn't you try to win Eva, Diek?" she asked softly.

I was astonished and alarmed. "But, Auntie," I cried emphatically, "from her earliest days she belonged to Eilert, you know that! And then remember what I was when I came to your house—a village waif, a working child, and you were such great people in my eyes. I always looked up to you and her. I do still!"

She thought a moment. "I hope you will get over that attitude of looking up, Diek," she replied. "You would have suited each other so well!" And she heaved a sigh. "But everything goes wrong! Although I believe even that is the will of God, Diek!"

When we reached the Butenschöns' we found Uncle Gosch in animated conversation with Clara's aunt, and as Auntie Lena strongly suspected that her husband's eagerness was inspired more by the lady than by the subject they were discussing she thought it wise to suggest there might be something boiling over in the kitchen, as she smelt a strong smell of burning.

Just as the aunt ran out, who should come in but Balle Bohnsack and Dina, whom I had invited to my wedding. I wanted to show my old school-friend a mark of esteem, and also to give him an opportunity of being with Dina. For after their last meeting I had begun to entertain the daring hope that they might yet be yoke-fellows.

Balle looked wonderful. He wore a red check shirt, a loose jacket, and a bright red tie; his trousers were stuffed into high boots that were shining black, and his forelock hung defiantly over his brow. Owing to the presence of many strangers and Auntie Lena, for whom he had the profoundest respect, he had lost his customary assurance. Nevertheless, in order to remind me of our complete understanding, he could not refrain from winking at me again and again, in his old manner, with one eye closed and the eyebrow of the other jerking spasmodically up and down under his fringe. I was not sure whether he was trying to express his joy over Dina's presence or to congratulate me on my marriage.

Dina was talking to Auntie Lena, and I went up to her and told her how pleased I was that she had come. She wore a very simple, tight-fitting blue dress, trimmed with lace at the cuffs and collar, and her skin had been scrubbed so hard that it looked as though it might bleed at any moment.

I told her that, next to the bride, she would be the prettiest girl present, and added that I would ask Balle what he thought of her dress.

"Him?" she cried, throwing me a glance full of indignation and contempt.

I signed to him and he came up.

When Auntie Lena saw him she was reminded of a certain rainy little railway station, and laying a hand on his shoulder she exclaimed: "You dear good fellow!" Then looking at Dina and noticing her indignant expression, she added: "How can you be frightened of him? What an impregnable little fortress you are! Why, if I were you I would marry him every day! I would only make one or two slight improvements in him."

"Unfortunately," said Balle reproachfully, "she has got it into her head that she must marry a sweep. But I think a cattle-dealer is better than that—quite apart from what I happen to be like." And he began the play with his eyes again, but so wildly that I was afraid he would never get them straight again.

Dina did not look at him, but plucked at her white cuffs, so as to make him feel that to have a cattle-dealer as a husband was the very last thing that would enter her mind.

"I have a feeling," observed Balle, with all his accustomed dignity, "that your wedding is going to put an end to an old feud and lead to another wedding. And I don't mind betting a sheep," he added, "that before another twenty-four hours have elapsed a certain haughty young person will address a certain other very eligible party as her dear Balle."

She swore she would jump into the Elbe first, and added that if she ever had occasion to speak to him again she would never utter that abominable name of Balle, but try to discover whether he had not got a Christian name like other people.

After we had finished our meal Auntie Lena fell asleep, and there was comparative silence round the table.

Up to that moment I had not mentioned a word about my novel. As the bridegroom, however, I felt it incumbent upon me to entertain the company, and as I was not a little proud of my creation I fetched the last chapter of the manuscript and read it aloud in a low voice.

They all listened most attentively.

When I came to the point where my hero embarked on the daring exploit of making his way across the wild and trackless Rockies my uncle gave a little cry of pain, and asked how I could possibly have continued the narrative without referring to other exploring expeditions, and more particularly the voyage of discovery which had led Pytheas to the North Sea.

I pleaded that had I done so I might have wearied my readers.

But Uncle Gosch remained adamant, maintaining that just as he could not imagine any American novelist omitting all reference to Columbus, so he could not believe that any European would fail to mention Pytheas, and hoped that I would never write a book in which that illustrious name did not occur.

I promised to do my best, and continued to read. But when I came to the point where my villain was trying to contrive the death of the hero's sweetheart, by making the car in which they were both driving run into a rock, Balle objected that a herd of oxen would be much more appropriate, and the elder Fräulein Butenschön and Uncle Gosch agreed. Sooth was evidently deeply moved by the danger threatening the girl, and Dina with a blush shyly suggested that, although I was the best judge, I must take care not to let the girl be killed or dirty her frock, and that a rock would be a much cleaner obstacle than a horrible herd of oxen.

"That's meant for me," exclaimed Balle. "But if she promises to look at me to-morrow as kindly as she is looking at you now I undertake to withdraw my amendment about the oxen."

At this moment Auntie Lena woke up, and immediately proceeded to congratulate Sooth on the way he looked after his brothers and sisters, about which she had known for years.

He was covered with confusion and did not know where to look, and when Clara Butenschön began belauding farmers and peasants, and declaring that if ever she had children she would send them all to farms in the country, and laughed loudly when Auntie Lena upbraided her, he looked utterly bewildered.

A bed had been made up for Sooth on my sofa that night, and when we retired he said that he was afraid he would not sleep a wink.

"Why not?" I asked.

"You think what she said about her children was a joke," he explained. "But she meant it seriously. She is either hard-hearted or dangerous—I don't know which—and I can see all our children going one after the other to the peasants the moment they are born."

I tried to comfort him. "Besides," I said, "you may not have any children."

"No children?" he exclaimed anxiously. "Why, she says she wants seven, and will send them all to farms!"

I laughed him to scorn, and turning my thoughts to my own bliss soon fell asleep.

I woke up the next morning before dawn, to find that Sooth had already gone; so, dressing quickly, I thought I would look for him in the flat. In the tiny hall I found Clara busy sweeping, and asked her whether she had seen Sooth. She was surprised, and replied that she had not. Feeling uneasy, I returned to my room, where I found a little note, in which he begged me to inform Clara that he could not marry her, as to do so would go against his conscience.

I returned to Clara in great alarm and showed her the note. I noticed that she too was frightened and turned pale. Glancing at the clock, she snatched up her coat and hat, saying that although she hoped he would be back before she returned, as he could not possibly play her such a trick on her wedding-day, she was going to look for him, and begged me to join her.

I did so. She hoped to find him at the station, feeling sure that he would change his mind at the last moment.

We did not find him in the station-hall, but in the dark corner of the third-class waiting-room which his brothers and sisters had occupied. I knew from his expression that he was seeing things blacker than ever before in his life, for his hat was pulled down over his eyes lower than I had ever seen it.

I went up to him and pulled his hat off. At first he did not recognize me. And it was only when Fräulein Butenschön dropped on to a bench and doubled up with laughter over the table that he looked first at me and then at her, and said in sepulchral tones that he would go back with us.

. . . . .

I seemed to be dreaming! There I stood in a frock-coat, receiving Auntie Lena's congratulations, hearing her speak of me as her third child, whom she loved as dearly as the other two, and kissing her again and again. A moment later I was sitting in a huge carriage upholstered in shabby grey cloth with Gesa at my side. She was in white, with a wreath of myrtle on her fair locks. Her hand was cold and trembling as it sought for mine. Behind her were the friends and companions of my childhood. I remember the procession at the church—Auntie Lena and Herr vom Gang, Uncle Gosch with my mother-in-law, my editor-in-chief and his son, followed by Gesa's brothers, Paul Sooth and his eldest sister, and representatives of all my father-in-law's twenty-five clubs. Among the company were Balle and Dina, and I could hear Balle's voice booming in the rear, while Dina implored him not to talk so much. Suddenly, just as we were entering the church, Balle shouted to me across the heads of the others that she had actually called him "Balduin." On either side of the church door stood over a score of Gesa's "boys," making an arch of their sculls and cheering their companion on many a sail. When we got inside there was a sudden outcry among the women. "Your petticoat, Gesa! Gesa, your petticoat! The safety-pins must have come undone!" They formed a ring round her, so that I could only see the top of her head and the myrtle wreath, and a moment later we stood confronting Pastor Peterson, with his huge, weather-beaten sailor's face. My "Yes" rang out bright and clear, and Gesa's low and quivering. After the ceremony Auntie Lena wept, and Uncle Gosch, in the tones of a monarch placing an order about his Prime Minister's neck, greeted me as "his old ally and comrade-in-arms on the question of Pytheas"!

Gesa was trembling so much on the way out that I asked her what was the matter. She whispered that she had been in church only once before in her life—for her confirmation—and that churches always frightened her. Outside there were signs of a commotion round our carriage, and I discovered that Balle had turned out the coachman and insisted on driving us home himself with Dina installed beside him on the box.

The festivities at the inn lasted a long time, but when at about eleven o'clock I turned to Gesa and asked her whether she would like me to take her home she nestled so close to me and begged me so sweetly to stay that I could not resist her.

Things were growing very lively. Auntie Lena was again a little bit perturbed about Uncle Gosch, who was sitting absorbed in conversation with Clara's aunt; but after skilfully contriving to spirit him away to my mother-in-law's side her voice once more recovered its full rich tone.

One of the "boys" had been entrusted with the duty of addressing a few words to Gesa in the name of his companions. At last he rose to his feet, pronounced a sentence, and then stuck fast. We all waited, hoping he would continue and make an end of the business. But he remained tongue-tied, staring at us, and I heard Balle ask my father-in-law whether he should make him sit down. At last Auntie Lena, in her fullest and richest tones, exclaimed: "Sit down, my dear boy!"

Then my father-in-law, who could not stand much in the way of drink, embarked on a rambling speech. For a long while none of us knew what he was talking about. Gradually, however, we gathered that Gesa and I were only another club or union which he had founded, and of which he had been elected president. One or two people tried to call him to order, but it was no good, and we had to let him elaborate his idea to the end.

The company then cleared the little room and began dancing, and I noticed that Gesa's bluestocking friend danced several times with a fat ship's mate, who seemed to be putting down vast quantities of liquor. After one of the dances she came and sat beside me, and asked me sorrowfully whether I thought there were such things as "absolute values" and "eternal love," and gazed despondently into the farthest depths of the room. I tried my best to help her, though I was not quite so zealous as I had been on my first sailing trip.

When I saw Uncle Gosch going towards the door alone I hurried after him, in case he wanted help. But he only wished to gaze upon the starlit waters of the Elbe, and to listen to the lapping of its wavelets on the bank. "To think, Diek," he said, "that they may have passed by this very spot!"

Thinking he was making a mistake, I reminded him that his children had travelled down the Elbe from Hamburg, not up it. But he was referring to Pytheas. "How their eyes, blinded by the sun of the south, must have peered through our grey nights, Diek!" he exclaimed.

On our return Balle informed me that Dina had just called him Balduin again quite calmly and naturally. His freckled face was radiant, and he winked again in his own peculiar way. In fact he grew so excited that he could think of nothing better to do than swathe himself in a blanket and act the Algeçiras Conference before us with the help of some of Gesa's boys. He, of course, was the Bey of Morocco. But as his spirits rose, and he began to act the part of a marsh peasant bringing his pigs to market, Dina launched an ultimatum, which suddenly pulled him up short, and during the clamour that ensued Gesa and I slipped away.

It was a bright starlight night, and a west wind fanned our faces. I noticed that Gesa went over to my left, explaining that as she wished to be an obedient wife she must keep to my left.

"You only want to be nearer the Elbe," I retorted, chaffing her. "Even now it attracts you!"

She denied this. "But I am glad we can see it and came this way," she added, glancing across the gleaming waters. "Just listen to the ripples! . . . When we get indoors I want to listen and see whether we can still hear them."

I hugged her tightly. "But for the moment you ought to see and hear only me," I replied.

She said nothing, but walked slowly on by my side. I seemed to feel her heart beating, or thought I did.

But I noticed that her face was still turned towards the river.

CHAPTER XIX

Gesa Goes Sailing

EVERY day I used to leave our little cottage on the bank before dawn and run to the station to catch my train for town. On reaching the newspaper office I would throw myself heart and soul into the work and keep scissors, pen, and bell for the printer's boy going the whole morning.

As soon as my three hours' work was done I would run back to the station, reach home, find lunch waiting for me on the hearth, eat it standing, and then lie down for a bit and read. Then I would turn to my own work.

I was writing my second novel at this time. Having gained courage, I had forged ahead, and no longer dealt with subjects about which I felt cold and indifferent, but described my own passions and sufferings, which, as I began to perceive, covered a wide and varied range. My scenes were no longer laid in foreign parts or in No-man's Land, and I chose subjects which had enthralled and terrified me as a child—tales which my father and Engel Tiedje had told each other across the forge fire while the smoke circled about their heads seeking a way out.

I used to sit absolutely alone in the quiet little house, at the side of which some narrow and seldom used stone steps led up to the village or down to the river. There was not a sound outside, except perhaps the ripple of the waters or the occasional shriek of a sea-gull or a steamer's siren. From time to time, when the scenes my mind conjured up moved me too deeply, I would stand up, go over to the little window—I had to stoop, it was so low—and glance at the waves and the clouds and the passing boats. By this time I knew almost every one of them—their size, their freight, their crews, and their destination. I had heard it all from Gesa. One more glance across the broad river to the misty horizon beyond the farther bank and I would return to my table and continue writing, undisturbed until nightfall.

But where was Gesa? Yes, where was Gesa?

I don't deny that occasionally she did happen to be at home. Yes . . . that is true. There were even times when, on my return, I found her busy in our little kitchen preparing our midday meal, none too skilfully. Sometimes too, while I sat working, she would take a seat beside my writing-table, and make a blouse or some other article of clothing, putting in her famous long stitches. She would then cast an occasional glance of mingled surprise and malevolence at my pen, and hum to herself. These glances at my pen and her humming disturbed me; but I said nothing. Yes, I admit that there were such occasions.

But as a rule Gesa was not there. On returning home I would find the place locked up. Inside everything was deserted, and I would go to the kitchen and eat whatever food I found left on the hearth. But it was hardly ever quite ready, for Gesa was accustomed to her companions lending her a hand in preparing food, and, after all, was I not her companion? But I had no gift for cooking. Nevertheless, with a quiet smile, I soon took to it, reflecting that it was a refreshing practical activity compared with my brain-work.

Was I miserable because she was not there? Did I reproach her? No! I was still too feverishly preoccupied by the work I had just done at the office, and even more so by the task that lay before me. Of course I felt I wanted my beloved; and how entrancing she was with her timid caresses and her chatter as she lay in my arms until deep into the night! It is true that she talked only of the Elbe and of sailing and clothes; but that did not matter! It was the way she said it all. It was her love that gave it a meaning. And, oh, how I loved her, and how happy I felt! In those days I did not miss the comrade—no, not yet. Work was my comrade, and as I needed no other I did not feel the lack of one.

Nay, I almost made excuses for her not being more at home and for always being either out on the river with her "boys" or over at her mother's, perched on the arm of the sofa, making her long stitches, or talking to her father, who like herself always had plenty of time on his hands, and was her twin soul. For hours at a time the two would discuss sails and sailing, old and new, past and future, while my mother-in-law sat silently by, flinging her little wooden sticks hither and thither, and dreaming about the rich uncle in furthest Ind and the great future awaiting her children.

Yes, that is how matters stood with Gesa. I knew she was safe, and I had my work. My work!

When at night I could hear her footsteps outside I would turn from my work and greet her. Looking down at me with mingled surprise and affection, she seemed to ask, Can this writing man really be my husband? Then as I rose to my feet she would spring into my arms and be mine until the morning breeze kissed the window, to give her the first greeting from the powers that were her masters.

I was never one of those who liked to work on the Sabbath, and would have preferred to starve rather than do anything on Sundays. But Gesa was different, not because she did any housework on Sundays, though. In fact, when did Gesa do her housework? She used to complain about the cares of housekeeping; but what trouble could our four small rooms have been, seeing that not one of them was larger than my father's forge fire? Moreover, the bulk of the work, even in these four small rooms, was done by me. She also complained about the trouble her sewing gave her. But how many hours could she have spent at it, seeing that she wore the simplest of clothes, which were all tacked together with her peculiar long stitches, and for the rest were held together with a dozen or more safety-pins? No, Gesa did very little housework, either on Sundays or any other day. Truth to tell, Gesa had no Sunday. She led exactly the same life on Sundays as on weekdays. She knew nothing of that wonderful concept, half sacred, half mystical—the symbol of pure and eternal peace—which consists in an ever-fresh perception of the eternal holiness of the Creator. She was like a bird that took refuge on the bank as long as it rained or thundered, but spread its wings and flew to the river as soon as the sky cleared.

If I said: "Let us stay at home, Gesa! Let us sit down and think for a while, or sit side by side at the window and think and talk!" she did not understand, but would only beg me to go down with her to the river, where she used to go every morning.

Timidly I suggested that she should go alone, and leave me to myself, to keep the Sabbath in solitude. For to me those hours were the most precious in the whole week.

But this made her quite wretched. She could not bear to think of me sitting alone in the cottage, or taking a solitary walk. It was as though she were leaving me in a cellar, shut out from sun and moon. She insisted on my going down to the river with her, to her boat and her friends. And she was only happy when I was on her beloved water with her, clinging to the fore-yard, and listening to her comments on wind and sail, and her old loves.

Eventually we would land at Övelgönne, and find ourselves surrounded by crowds of her friends, who were far more numerous on Sundays than on weekdays, and we would sit in our boats or in the parlour of an inn and talk about the Elbe. They were all mad on the Elbe, particularly those who had come from Hamburg for the day.

My father-in-law, in his smart blue suit and his cap with the gold shield thrust a little to one side, was the heart and soul of these gatherings, and was always very lively. I confess I was bored, bored to death. I would try to engage one of my neighbours in conversation about things that interested me, and would ask him about his life, his antecedents, his friends, colleagues, and future. But he never seemed to have any, or to know anything about them if he had.

If we went to my father-in-law's house for an hour or so we usually saw the two youngest boys there, and I would ask Eusebius how he had got on during the week. Unfortunately, owing to his strenuous overnight study of Chinese he would be tongue-tied and unable to speak. And if I asked Adalbert about even the most ordinary matters we would, to my regret, stop short, because some secret connected with the Mayor or the city of Hamburg sealed his lips. A casual mention of the WoermannSteamship Company would land us on the threshold of secrets which, if divulged, would have sent the Town Hall of Hamburg sky-high; and so it was hopeless. Finally, if I elected to talk to my mother-in-law I did so at my own risk, for she would soon start off on the subject of the rich uncle in furthest Ind. But she looked so straight and comely, and there was so much faith and goodwill in her eyes, as she jerked her little wooden sticks hither and thither, that for a while I would feel a little happier.

When Gesa called me, and, seizing my hand, led me away, we would return with her father to the crowd of Elbe maniacs; and there I would sit, imprisoned in the cage of my own thoughts. If ever I made an attempt to escape from the cage a word or a question from one of those about me would quickly drive me back again, and when I felt I could endure it no longer I would plead a headache and go for a lonely walk.

Then, at last, my mind would gradually recover its serenity; by degrees the wonderful capacity to celebrate the Sabbath would be restored, and from the summit of some sacred hill I would contemplate life, freed from its worrying details and noises.

Sometimes, although I had not intended to be away for longer than an hour, I would find it impossible to return to my fellows, and take off my crown and fling it into the Elbe. So I would prolong my walk, and eventually return home in a state of mild bewilderment regarding my own mood, Gesa, and my life in general.

In the spring I happened to see that a group of Northern artists were giving an exhibition of their works at Hamburg, and among their number I read the name of Eilert Mumm, now so familiar to all lovers of art. The article dealing with the exhibition spoke very highly of my old friend, saying that two years previously he had created something of a sensation with some landscapes full of wonderful passion and power. I also heard that he had called at the office for me, and felt very proud that he should have wanted to see me.

Putting everything aside, I went to visit the exhibition, and after looking at the pictures and standing for some time lost in admiration before them I inquired of an official where the artist was living.

The man smiled and replied that this was a question which neither he nor anyone else—not even the artist himself—could answer. But he thought he was staying at a friend's house, and I gathered that the friend in question was a woman.

A few days later Gesa came up from the river and informed me that while she was sitting in her boat that afternoon at Övelgönne a broad-shouldered thick-set man with a large head and extraordinarily piercing eyes had come to the landing-stage, accompanied by friends and a pretty woman, and had told her that he had heard she was my wife.

I was overjoyed. "Yes, it is he!" I cried. "Did you invite him to come here?"

She nodded and replied that he was coming on Sunday afternoon. Then she questioned me about my own claim to being an artist. Eilert, she declared, was an artist, and yet he had said that he loved the Elbe. And she looked up at me with puzzled eyes.

I admitted the possibility of what she said, but pointed out that an artist was like a hunter, who moved from one hunting-ground to another.

"Oh, you must write a novel about sailing!" she cried, her beautiful eyes lighting up.

I shook my head. "No, Gesa dear," I replied. "You are mistaken if you imagine you would be happier about me if I did. You see, Eilert and I love the Elbe in a different way from what you do. To us it is merely the scene, the image of the life force."

But I could see that she did not understand and that her interest immediately vanished.

When I questioned her about Eilert's lady friend she looked dubious and said she might have been an actress, and that now and again she broke into a foreign language and looked no better than she should be.

Eilert arrived before lunch, just as we were taking our food into the sitting-room, and shared our repast. Unfortunately Gesa had not had time to prepare a proper meal, and all we had was potatoes in their skins, and a little ham, which we served on wooden plates, of which we had only two, so that Gesa and I had to share one between us.

She was somewhat ashamed, and cast quick, shy glances at me from time to time. But Eilert was so simple and natural that she grew calmer and happier and watched him with considerable curiosity. He was a little over thirty at the time, but looked older. Exposure to wind and sun, hard living, with plenty of wine, love, and smoking, had made his powerful features prematurely lined. Now and again he talked with great animation, but suddenly his flow of thought would stop as though it had been swallowed up in a well, and he would sit tongue-tied, not even listening to what others were saying.

But there was something great and brilliant about him; he seemed to belong to all Europe rather than to any particular European country.

He glanced round our modest and oh! so tiny rooms, and congratulated me on Gesa.

"There, do you hear that?" she exclaimed, flushing with pleasure.

"Yes," said Eilert to her, "but you have made a good bargain too, let me tell you! We were all very fond of him in Ballum. Why, he was a sort of little king there! But you must have felt there was something special about him, and that's why you took him!"

She shook her head, and, as this was the second time that day that she had failed to understand, her eyes filled with tears, and she cried in bewilderment, "Me? No, I loved him—that was all!"

He told us he had been in Belgium, where he had married and been divorced, and that after making friends with a French artist in Normandy he had often visited Paris, but latterly had lived in Antwerp.

I told him all I knew about his mother and sister and the Ballum people. But I could not persuade him to get into touch with Auntie Lena and Eva again. He said it would be useless. "Even Eva," he added, "is biased and takes it upon herself to judge people."

He informed us that his lady friend was a would-be admirer, who had clung to him ever since he had been in Amsterdam. "Very nice and pleasant, but not sincere. I'm sick of that kind of woman," he declared. "If there's one woman in the world I should like to have with me at the present moment, do you know who it is?—Uhle Monk!" Then he added, "I want to develop in my own way and refuse to be disturbed. That is why the only kind of woman I can stand is one who has no pretensions to being my spiritual equal, and who refuses—does not even attempt—to interfere with my nature, my work, and my daily task."

Gesa listened breathlessly, and drawing closer to my side put her hand in mine. I believe she was frightened.

He said he would like to stop about a month on the Elbe. He had an idea, and pointed with the stem of his pipe up the river.

Gesa, thinking that he wanted to paint a picture from our cottage, suggested eagerly that he might stay next door, and that Uhle Monk might come to keep house for him.

He agreed, saying that the two shepherds could quite well spare her for a few weeks.

"Or Bothilde might take her place for a bit with the two shepherds," I suggested. "You know—Balle's sister."

After inspecting the house next door, Eilert was perfectly satisfied with the arrangement, and sent a message to Uhle by a boatman who was going to Ballum. It was characteristic of his simple nature that he instinctively avoided modern methods of communication.

When he had gone I discussed him with Gesa for some time, and, noticing that she was unusually quiet, I asked her what was the matter. She replied that she had watched him carefully, and he had not shown any signs of surprise at our simple meal.

I replied that neither he nor I troubled much about such things.

She agreed that we were very much alike, even in the matter of not liking to be disturbed, and maintained that neither of us could stand having a real live creature near him.

I smiled and protested faintly.

"Oh, yes," she rejoined, "I know I am always disturbing you. And I often want you to go for a sail. But the worst of it is, I am not a good companion to you. Uhle, you say, is a very good housewife, and I am not."

I ought to have banished this notion completely from her mind; but it just happened to touch my sore point. Besides, I imagined that it was my duty to help her. When one is young one thinks one can reform people and change their natures for their own good. So I said cautiously: "I think it would be rather a good plan if you made up your mind, once and for all, no matter what the wind is like, to devote either your mornings or your afternoons to the house. You would make things much more comfortable for me, and feel all the happier yourself." Truth to tell, it passed my comprehension how she could exist day after day, without any duties, whiling away the time sailing up and down, with little or much sail, fast or slow, before the wind.

She was astonished and distressed by this first reference to the difference between us. "But the wind pays no attention to the time of day, Holler!" she stammered.

I tried tactfully to remind her that the wind, although important, was not the only important phenomenon on earth.

She agreed, but repeated her objection about the wind's disregard of time.

I hinted discreetly that numbers of women I knew—Auntie Lena, for instance, and her own mother—did their housework without paying any attention to the wind.

Although I said all this with a smile, she saw that I was serious. "But my father lives like that!" she exclaimed in sudden alarm. "So perhaps I ought not to have married!"

I laughed, and light-heartedly too. "You not marry?" I cried. "Who on earth was more fit to marry than you?" And I kissed and fondled her.

. . . . .

Four days later I saw, on my return from work, a piece of paper pinned to the front door bearing the word "Arrived," and on going next door I found Eilert and Uhle in the kitchen. Uhle was very simply dressed, and wore round her neck a Frisian necklace of gold and silver balls, given her by Eilert. But her face did not look as red as it used to do, probably because her hair was going grey. Her mouth was still as large and luscious as ever, though she must have been about forty.

When she saw me she laughed in her silly, confused way, gave me good news of Auntie Lena and the couple in America, and a moment later, while I was helping Eilert to unpack his things, I saw her sitting by the fire, looking into the flames exactly as I had seen her look when I first went to Auntie Lena's house as a child. I was so much moved by the sight that, laying a hand on her shoulder, I said: "I am glad to see you again, dear old Uhle; and with Eilert too!"

They lived next door to us for a month, and for me it was a period of peculiar bliss. Every afternoon I went over at least once to see how the work was progressing, and in the first fortnight he finished a landscape of the Elbe. After that, as the weather was bad, he remained at home and painted a picture of Uhle. When I happened to catch him at work I found him sitting on a low stool, bending over his picture, with his short pipe in his mouth, while Uhle sat in front of him knitting or sewing by the fire. They were usually silent when I was there, and if they spoke at all it was in slow, soft tones about Ballum and all that went on there. They might have been two old workmen or peasants who had known each other for years and happened to have met on the same job.

Gesa was deeply interested in them both. But she never visited them alone, as they made her feel uncomfortable. She went only when I went. She evidently thought about them a good deal, and I fancy tried to gather from their conversation and the way they lived certain things about my nature and our marriage which at that time were beginning to cause her some anxiety. She tried to be a better housewife; she watched Uhle's methods, and for weeks gave me meals which, though quickly prepared, were at least more conventional than they had been before. She also made another attempt to show an interest in my work, and from the questions she asked about my novel I gathered that she sometimes peeped into it while I was at the office. But when I told her about it I noticed that the imaginative treatment of reality was unpleasant, nay, actually repellent, to her, and that her interest flagged. While I was speaking I saw her eyes turn quickly to the window, against which the call of the wind could be heard, and while she pretended to be listening to me her dear eager eyes were looking down at the river.

I did not know then how utterly different we were. But I felt it, or was beginning to feel it. So I spared her the necessity for pretence, anxiety, and constraint, which would only have harmed her sweet soul, her truthfulness, and her honesty if she had persisted.

"The wind is favourable, Gesa," I said, going to the window. "You ought to go for a little sail."

For a little while we talked of other things; then she went with me to the window and leant out. "I think Father will be able to come with me this afternoon," she observed.

There was the suggestion of a lie in her words, for my father-in-law always had time to accompany her.

She went to put on her blue woollen jumper, and, on returning, flung her arm round my neck. I kissed her passionately, and with a little sigh she gave me a hug and left.

Was I too weak? Ought I to have tried by deep and subtle wiles to wean her from her obsession? I doubt it! I should only have made an enemy of her. She would only have hated me, and would have been filled with loathing, instead of love, when she took her last trip of all.

Uhle, with her marvellous intuition, guessed what was wrong with Gesa, and took over the whole of our housework. This proved too strong a temptation for Gesa, though possibly a recurrence of favourable winds and invitations from friends may also have played their part. At all events, the river kept her unusually busy. She also received an invitation to go for a cruise round Heligoland, and was away for three days. On her return she was delighted to find the whole place in apple-pie order. After that we had visitors, good honest yachting folk from Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. I liked them, but could find nothing to say to them, though Gesa got on with them wonderfully. Knowing that I should now be well looked after, she went for one or two long trips with them, to Kiel and the Danish islands, and sent me picture postcards, on which there was always some kind of vessel in full sail. As for her news, it was always the same: "My dear Holler,—We are getting a strong sou'-wester. It has been a wonderful trip! The boys are very nice to me. Your Gesa."

Meanwhile I worked at home alone. But I too was obsessed. I know that now. For, young as I was, and passionately as I loved her, I remember how once, when she returned from a long trip, the third day of which I had missed her terribly, I nevertheless felt more eager about my work than about her.

Bursting with enthusiasm, she began in her simple, rather helpless way to give me an account of her experiences, of the wind, the sails, the sea, and the risks they had run.

But I had been absorbed in my work for four days, and had spent one lonely Sunday in a state of extraordinary exaltation, with the result that I simply could not listen to her. I could not bring myself to lend a sympathetic ear to her description of all these incidents, which to me were so jejune and uninteresting. I tried to get her to tell me something about the spiritual and emotional aspects of her excursion, but she could not do so, and, not understanding why I should want it, turned once more to the vagaries of the mainsail and her exploits at the tiller. But I could not listen, and while she continued her narrative I proceeded to think out a scene in the book I was writing at the time.

That night in bed I suddenly became aware that she was crying, and feeling alarmed—for I had not seen her cry before—I asked her what was the matter. She told me that she had known for a long time that I was quite different from her, that I had no sympathy either with her outlook or her conversation, and that her whole family had also remained strangers to me. She then proceeded to enumerate her shortcomings—her constant preoccupation with sailing, her neglect of her household duties, her peculiar way of sewing, and so on. She had noticed that I was thinking about my own "dreadful work" all through her account of her trip, and she knew that my soul, my love, and my happiness were in "that dreadful work" and not with her and her life. All we had in common was our unhappy love for each other; it was a great misfortune, and she did not know what would happen.

I scoffed, I protested, and showed my surprise. How grotesque was the picture she had drawn! We unhappy! And I kissed and fondled her, and laughed, and called her the maddest, tenderest names, until she too had to laugh, and we fell asleep in each other's arms.

When I reached home on the afternoon of the next day—Gesa had left the house at the same time as I had that morning, to go off on a long trip—I found a note from Uhle on the kitchen-table informing me that my dinner was on the hob. I went to fetch it, and ate it in solitude, as I had so often done before. Then I went over to my neighbours, and found them occupied in the usual way, except that the low-ceilinged kitchen seemed to be full of dancing flames.

Eilert had evidently been poking his nose into chests and cupboards, and had found a number of church vessels, whose shape had delighted his eye—he was drunk at the time—and he had given them to Uhle to clean. When I entered he was sitting painting and humming old ditties, and studying the lights playing about Uhle's face and arms as she turned the vessels over. She was not drunk, but, infected by his fuddled state, she could not help becoming terribly excited, and, singing softly, she swayed her body about in what seemed to me a most uncanny way.

I could not help feeling that what was going on was most unfair to the people to whom the articles belonged, but I could not tell him so. For what he was doing was also sacred to me, although I saw to my sorrow that he had once again fallen a victim to his old passion.

He said he wanted to live at the sheep-farm, and made all sorts of absurd proposals, declaring that he would invent a machine for writing words on the blue sky, but would reveal the secret to nobody. What he wanted to write were the words: "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good." With the stubborn insistence of the drunkard, he repeated that everything, everything, was good. "Thoroughly good," he said, in friendly, scoffing tones, tapping the floor with the end of his pencil, "especially you and I and Uhle!"

More nonsense of the same kind followed, and as I listened I wondered how I could put an end to the disorder before me. At last I said quite casually to Uhle: "I say, Uhle, do be careful not to let anybody see you with those things. The caretaker would get into a terrible row."

They both listened—they were the kindest-hearted couple in the world—and promised to be careful. "Just one hour more, little Ensign!" added Eilert. "I am tearing like a hart through the undergrowth as it is—but it is going to be something!"

On the following day when I went in Uhle was sitting alone by the hearth, and from the little room next door came the sound of confused drunken ravings. She signed to me not to make a noise and said he was ill. Even the kitchen smelt of rum.

Without saying a word I crept on tiptoe up to the picture and looked at it. But the gold and bronze had all vanished, and nothing was left but a dim, dying fire, with Uhle huddling up to it, her shoulders bare, staring resignedly and with a look of faint expectation into the cooling embers. Gazing steadily at the picture, I suddenly felt I was going to cry, and went out.

When I went there again three days later they had left, and their landlady did not know where they had gone. She remarked in calm astonishment that she had never known such good simple people.

Meanwhile I had been working very hard.

I admit that there were material aims behind all my artistic zeal; for I was poor and wanted to earn money, so that we could live a little more comfortably. Above all I was anxious to pay off the mortgage which Uncle Peter still had on my parents' house. I was also ambitious, and longed to become famous, and to be read by thousands. But the mainspring of all my feverish industry at this time was, after all, the pleasure I took in the work itself, in the act of creation, and in forming pictures out of inchoate life.

My beloved life-mate saw with her intelligent discerning eyes how completely my work had taken possession of my soul, and knew that this passion was too strong for her to supplant. She made the most touching attempts to enter into my world, and with a certain sense of shame begged me to let her read the books which I considered beautiful. I gave her Grimm's Fairy Tales, Theodor Storm's stories, and Marryat's *Settlers in Canada*. But I soon noticed that while she held these books in her hand her mind was not in her reading, but that she was thinking of the sounds outside, while her eyes would wander to the clouds and to the ripples on the river. Then with a deep sigh she would lay the book down, go up to the window, look out, come back, cast a shy glance at me, and finally sit down and pretend to read again. And from that moment she became a hypocrite.

I used to read Marryat's *Settlers* aloud to her. We wanted to practise English pronunciation, so I read the original, putting as much feeling and expression as I could into it. But I saw that she was amusing herself by drawing, and that as I read on and on she was smiling to herself. Then, suddenly, in the middle of my reading, she would exclaim: "Oh, look, what a funny boat I've drawn!"

When she came home she used to describe all the little things she had seen. At first I did not understand, but at last I concluded that her object was to help me with my book by providing me with 'copy.' She seemed to think that writing a book was like filling a sack of flour or a barrel of fish. It was terribly pathetic! And what a hypocrite I had to be! I had to pretend that I was delighted, as though she really were enriching my store of experience! But, like all people who lack imagination, she was singularly sensitive about lies, and in the end she discovered my pretence and gave up 'helping' me.

After this she enlisted the support of her family. First her mother appealed to me and implored me not to take it amiss that Gesa spent so much of her time on the Elbe. She had had to put up with the same thing herself from her husband. But everything would be all right when the Indian uncle came back; then we should be able to afford a servant. Next my father-in-law approached me. With a twinkle in his eye he observed how funny the world and its inhabitants were, leaving me to infer that not only he and his children but I too was a figure of fun. Then still smiling he urged me to give up "all this quill-driving." What did I get out of it? I would only grow crooked and bent, and unfit myself for real life. I ought to go sailing with him and his friends. I did not know how wonderful it was!

I was at the end of my tether, and hinted that all people were not alike. "I would rather sit huddled up under my writing-table for a whole week," I said, "with my head between my knees, than spend that amount of time in the company of sailing enthusiasts."

His face clouded; it was surprising, he said, that although I was not like either Gesa or himself I did not resemble the other side of the family either.

I reminded him of his eldest son, the farmer, remarking that he too had nothing in common with either side of his family. "I am like him," I added.

He smiled and assured me that he himself had done a certain amount of writing, but that it had brought him nothing but annoyance, and prophesied that I should one day feel the same.

My brother-in-law Adalbert was the next to come to me, and although our conversation was repeatedly interrupted, for fear we might touch upon important secrets connected with the municipality of Hamburg, in the end I gathered that he suggested approaching the Mayor and begging him to use his influence on my behalf.

I was too young and too kind to advise him to think of his own future first; so I merely thanked him rather coldly and said I preferred to look after myself.

I gather that Gesa's family must have told her I was hopeless; for she became very subdued, and I thought I sometimes heard her crying at night. I hope to God I was kind to her! I have nothing to reproach her with, and I trust that in eternity she feels the same about me. We loved each other, and while we were strangers we imagined we each possessed the qualities the other desired in a mate. When we found we were wrong we did not cease to love one another, but our love got into difficulties and began to suffer.

CHAPTER XX

A Visit to Stormfeld

In the late summer I finished my second novel, which was based upon memories of my home, my parents, and my childhood. I believed it to be not only an original but also a good piece of work, something that I hoped would stand out conspicuously in the literature of my day. But I also had moments of deep misgiving, when I wondered whether coming from the pen of a Low Saxon like myself my story were not too heavy and clumsy, and possibly too serious. Nevertheless, though my heart was full of qualms, I ventured to submit it to a well-known firm of publishers, and spent weeks of torture, during which my mind fluctuated between the lowest depths of despair and the most sanguine hopes. There were only one or two people who knew I had written another novel, and nobody had the smallest inkling as to what it was about, least of all Gesa.

The publishers accepted it!

I was stirred to the depths. The faint, half-frightened hope that I had nursed of becoming one of the little group of artists whose names stood out before the German people seemed as if it might, after all, be realized. How fervently I thanked God for the powers with which he had endowed me, and how deeply I felt the responsibility their possession entailed! But I said nothing about all this to anyone, for I have never been communicative. Meanwhile I was conscious that year of possessing a superabundance of strength and creative power, as though a rich spring had suddenly welled up in my heart, and I sat down and wrote and wrote as if from dictation, not even giving myself time to elaborate or polish the thoughts as I put them on paper. But I did not tell anybody about this either, not even Gesa.

She was puzzled by the publishers' acceptance of my second novel, and did not seem to understand what a marvellous event it was to me. Perhaps I was wrong not to open my heart about it to my mother-in-law. I ought to have gone to her and told her that while her mind was always full of wonderful dreams and fantasies she had not eyes or ears for the marvellous event that had taken place under her very nose and which must mean so much for her child, whom I loved more than anything on earth! But I said nothing. I was too shy and irresolute.

The publishers were offering me in advanced royalties a sum which was several hundred marks above the mortgage on my parents' house. It was not surprising that I should measure these first literary earnings by this standard; for had I not constantly heard the sum mentioned both by my parents and Engel Tiedje ever since I had been a child of three?

I informed Gesa that when I had bought a new outfit for herself and me I intended to spend the balance of the money in paying off the mortgage on my parents' house—telling her that from my earliest childhood I had regarded such a possibility as belonging only to the realm of fairy-tale.

She thoroughly approved of my scheme, and, as she had no acquisitiveness whatever, suggested that I should give the house to Engel Tiedje as soon as it was free from debt.

But I shook my head, saying that I would never give up my parents' house as long as I lived, for how could I tell whether our children might not one day find their home and their happiness there?

She looked up at me. "Oh, Holler!" she exclaimed in faint embarrassment.

"What's the matter, Gesa?" I cried, suddenly alarmed by her manner. "Surely we shall have children?" But like a flash a surmise—nay, a suspicion—entered my mind.

"I really don't know, Holler . . ." she replied sadly.

"Do you mean you don't want any?" I exclaimed aghast.

She looked up uneasily. "Do you think it would be a good thing?" she asked.

"I hope, Gesa, you are not thinking that it might prevent you from going sailing on the Elbe for a time?" I replied very gravely.

Looking at me until her eyes filled with tears, she answered tremulously: "But if it were to take after me it would fly on to the water and remain a stranger to you, and if it were like you it would be a stranger to me. . . . Who would it belong to?"

I smiled. "Then I should have two on the water."

"Or in it!" she exclaimed despondently. "You're anxious enough about me as it is."

As it was a painful subject I quickly changed it by announcing my intention of taking the money to Stormfeld myself and of going to see my adoptive parents in Ballum as well. I pleaded as an excuse that I did not like to entrust Engel Tiedje with the task of paying over the sum for the mortgage, but my real motive was that, although neither Gesa nor her people had any understanding of what was agitating me at that moment, I knew that both in Stormfeld and Ballum I should find friends who would rejoice with me when I opened my heart to them.

I went by train to the nearest station to Stormfeld and walked the rest of the way, reaching the village about supper-time. The front door of our house, which my mother in her nervousness would certainly have bolted by now, I found open, and I stepped gently into the parlour.

I noticed that it looked very clean and had hardly changed at all, except that the Town Hall of Lüneberg was standing on the sewing-table. The sight of the little low-ceilinged room brought back the image of my parents so vividly to my mind that for a moment I was completely overcome by the longing I felt to pour out my heart to them, and covering my face with my hands I cried desperately to myself, "Oh, if only they were alive! Oh, if only they were here!"

Passing on through the kitchen, which was empty, I opened the door leading to the forge, and there I saw Engel, a broad, crooked little figure, all black from work, standing at the forge fire. Through the window beyond I espied his assistant, busy with a horse; for I had already heard that since Auntie Siene had taken his affairs in hand he had enough work for a second smith at the forge.

When he saw me his face betrayed the emotion and joy he felt. Laying an arm about his shoulders, I addressed him in the old affectionate way, and asked him to tell me his news.

Apparently he was very happy. Auntie Siene, it was true, came rather often into the forge. "But they are all like that," he said, "except that she keeps rather too sharp an eye on things."

I smiled, and asked him whether he still put down his accounts in the book. But he shook his head, and looked embarrassed, and it transpired that *she* did not think much of account-books, but was more concerned about getting the money out of the customers—a little detail which Engel had overlooked too long. But with all her practical qualities Engel had to admit that she was sadly lacking in imagination. As the best possible proof of this, he informed me mournfully, while he kept a stealthy watch on the kitchen door, that she had done away with the dog-wheel that turned the grindstone, though he agreed that possibly the contrivance was not much use. Then with an air of great mystery he pointed to the darkest corner of the forge in which stood a model winch he had made out of old clock-wheels, and explained that it was for my eldest child to play with, but that *she* knew nothing about it.

Deeply touched, I thanked him, and, sadly remembering Gesa's confession, I suddenly burst out with all my news and all the ideas that filled my mind.

He did not understand much, but, thinking that I probably felt a call to some funambulistic or fire-eating profession, exclaimed in confusion: "God's miracle! God's miracle, Otto, can it be possible!"

When I explained that Schiller and Defoe and the author of *The Arabian Nights* had been of the same calling as myself, and showed him some of the proofs of my novel, which I had in my pocket, his heart stood still. Buried in thought, he removed his apron—a thing he did only on the eve of festivals or when he was called to a meal—and then solemnly washed his hands. When he had finished he took the proofs from me, held them at arms'-length, and read the first few lines. Then, sinking on to a bench, he looked up at me utterly dazed.

I am sure he had not the faintest notion what he had read, for remembering that Schiller in his youth had written something against tyrants, he asked me whether it was all against tyrants.

I gave him a brief outline of the story, and was delighted when, on recognizing some of the figures, he lifted his hand

and in great excitement pointed in the direction where the character I had in mind was to be found. I am afraid my summary of the novel was too sketchy and confused for him to be able to follow it properly; but he believed in me and was pleased and astonished.

Then, putting my hand into my pocket again, I showed him the money.

He had put his short pipe in his mouth, and had been contentedly smoking; but on seeing the money he thrust the pipe back into the gaping pocket of his jacket, from which a thin spiral of smoke immediately began to rise. He exclaimed again at the sight of the money, and the more he thought about it the more suspicious did he become, until at last he came to the conclusion that it was a sort of conjuring trick such as he had seen at fairs. So I was obliged to explain to him that literary work was paid for like any other job, and that a man could keep himself by it.

But this did not afford him much comfort, and he seemed to have an idea that I ought to offer the money to some church or cause. Meanwhile, in the heat of our discussion, we had not noticed that his pocket was alight, and we had to attend to the smouldering cloth and the burning pipe before I was able to tell him about my idea of paying off the mortgage which Uncle Peter had on our house.

He was by no means pleased at the idea, and I gathered that he had grown so accustomed to the mortgage that he would feel lost without it. After a while, however, particularly when I told him that we would go to Steenkarken together to pay the money to Uncle Peter, he seemed better pleased and agreed to accompany me.

How well I remember that three hours' walk through wind and sun with the fields of ripe corn ever about us and the dwarfed little figure at my side! And how we talked! We seemed to discuss everything, from the nature of eternal life to the character of my wife Gesa; and as I listened to what he had to say on the latter subject I could not help feeling with faint distress how badly she fitted into the world to which I belonged, and which, after all, was my kingdom.

As we approached the town he asked me to count the money again, and heaved a sigh of relief when we found it correct; but he insisted on our paying it through a lawyer—otherwise, he said, my uncle would be sure to cheat me.

I had not seen the town for fifteen years, and I walked through its familiar streets with a heavy heart, not saying a word. Engel too was silent, and looked nervously about him, as though he expected strangers to stare at his odd figure.

While we were still some distance away I saw a big broad-shouldered woman standing in the doorway of my uncle's house, and as we drew nearer I recognized her as the creature who had been in the habit of doing my uncle's charing for him, and whom Balle had dubbed the "treacle-barrel." She did not recognize me, even when I asked her whether she was living there now, and turning to Engel, whom she did remember, demanded what I meant, seeing that she was the mistress of the house.

When I explained that I was a nephew and did not know my uncle had married, she recognized me.

I said I hoped she was happy.

"Happy!" she repeated scornfully, "with an old tin-whistle like him! I only did it because I wanted to be kept!"

Apparently things were going better with him, for he now had an assistant as well as an apprentice; but when I pointed out that, after all, they only had their two selves to keep, she rejoined sullenly that she had two daughters, who lived with her.

I reminded her of my uncle's dread of children, and said that he had imagined she had no encumbrances.

"So did everybody," she replied scornfully. "But I had two daughters, and they are living with me now."

Astonished to find that a treacle-barrel could turn to vinegar in this way, we followed her into the workshop. It was just the same except for its inmates. My uncle had changed. On the best stool, which he always used to occupy, sat his huge brawny assistant, who looked as if he might be a relative of the wife, and by his side sat the apprentice. My uncle, however, was seated on a third stool, for which there did not seem to be sufficient space or light, and to my astonishment there was a cradle beside him, which he occasionally rocked with a touch of his left foot. He had aged a great deal, and was much more bent. Sitting on the table in the background, where in the old days it had been my lot to prepare the meals, there sat a big young woman, whom, from her features, I took to be one of the daughters, and with her were two more children.

The young woman, anxious to be polite, snatched up one of the children from a chair, which she offered to me, and turning to Uncle Peter exclaimed sharply, "Here, take the child!" and put it in his arms. Meanwhile Engel, staring from one to the other, retreated to the wall; but I noticed that he avoided looking at my uncle, because he knew too much about him.

I for my part could not take my eyes off him, and could not help asking him how he liked acting nursemaid.

He tried in vain to put on his old waggish expression, and replied that one got used to anything.

I told him all the news that I felt would interest him about Paul Sooth and Balle. But he avoided my eyes, as God knows he had every reason to do, and said nothing. Then his wife volunteered the information that he had lost all his savings through an injudicious loan.

I replied that I had come to give him some money—no less a sum than twelve thousand marks; but although he turned pale and looked far from pleased the elder woman almost danced for joy. "Think of it, Trina!" she cried, "twelve thousand marks! Think of it. . . . Now perhaps you will be able to marry after all!"

The burly assistant paused in his hammering. "Well, don't think of me in that connection, ma'am," he said firmly, "she won't hook me! I want a respectable girl, and you can't call Trina respectable!"

"And who's thinking of you, I should like to know?" shrieked the elder woman angrily. Whereupon a lively altercation ensued.

I spread the money out in front of Uncle Peter and asked him to count it.

"Oh, nonsense!" cried his wife. "What has it got to do with him?"

He tried to get up, but failed. Then, gazing at the banknotes on the table, with his eyes starting out of his head, he moaned: "My money!"

"You old sneak!" she cried, shaking her fist at him. "Fancy never telling me anything about it!" Then counting the money carefully and finding it correct, she added, "Come over here and sign!"

Letting the child slide from his lap, he rose, and bending over the table signed the document with a trembling hand. He glanced once more at the notes his wife was holding, put his blue fingers to his face, groaned, and left the room. I believe he wanted to escape from my eyes, into which he had not once looked since he had recognized who I was.

Then we said good-bye to the women and left.

On reaching home we were met by Auntie Siene, who informed us that she had just received a visitor, a niece, and on entering the parlour what should I see but Gesa's smiling face! Oh, how delighted I was! Those happy laughing eyes! That red mouth so full of life! Those arms about my neck! And Engel Tiedje digging me in the ribs with his elbow all the evening while we sat and talked, trying to convey to me how pretty and delightful he thought her!

She had come by boat with friends, and on the following morning, as the wind was favourable, she left. Almost immediately after she had gone I took my departure also, and continuing my journey reached the ferry outside Ballum towards evening.

The ferryman told me all about his family. Dina had been married to Balle a year now, and the couple lived at the corner of the market square, where Balle had a butcher's shop. He had learnt the business and finally set up for himself. Old Busch made me promise to go to see them. Helmut, he added in pained accents, was lost.

I was astonished and did not understand. Surely he had not been sent to prison, I asked anxiously.

It was evidently worse than that.

After further questioning, and looking suspiciously at two peasants on the other side of the ferry, he turned to me and said softly—or what he believed to be softly: "He has joined the Socialists! Yes, he is a Socialist leader, and has become a sort of head of a big business they have in Hamburg."

I heaved a sigh of relief when at last I discovered that the good fellow had merely given up his old calling in order to accept a post in a large co-operative store, and tried to explain to the father that the Socialists were a political party like any other, and that it did Helmut credit to hold such an important position at his age.

He listened patiently, but I could see that he did not believe me. He evidently regarded the Socialists as a sort of robber band, and imagined that his son had become their leader. In vain did I try to describe the kind of business transacted by a co-operative store; he merely replied that he would regret until his dying day that his son had not been a sergeant-major. But at last he promised to discuss the matter with other people, and I had to be satisfied with that.

I found Auntie Lena's front door open as usual, and as there was no one either in the hall or in the sitting-room I went to the study, where I found Uncle Gosch sitting at the writing-table absorbed in his work. It was only when I told him I was there that he stood up and greeted me with his old cheerful cordiality.

Yes, the news from America was excellent, but evidently his chief interest lay in his new work. Having reached the age-limit, he had given up his duties at the school, and was now engaged in writing a book on *The North Sea Coast: its Inhabitants in Ancient Times,* which would give his old antagonist Sven Modersohn his death-blow.

He was still holding on to the button of my jacket, and discussing all this in the liveliest manner, when Auntie Lena came in.

She had aged a good deal and looked quite matronly, but it struck me that she was entering upon the calmest and most balanced period of her life. She was not a big woman, but her easy, calm, and energetic bearing lent her the dignity of a queen. With the turmoil and ambition of her youth behind her the innermost depths of her nature—all its smugness, kindness, lust of dominion, and love of organizing—reached full bloom, and for the next fifteen years she was the undisputed sovereign of Ballum.

Taking her usual seat in the large armchair, she pointed lightly to her right cheek and told me to kiss her; and, bending over her, I kissed her on the mouth.

She inquired after Gesa, and I described our life. But although I was very careful about what I said, and tried to appear cheerful and confident, she could see that things were not as they should be—indeed, I think she saw much more clearly than I did that matters were in a very bad way. At least, so I imagined, for she looked searchingly at me with her large bright eyes and began describing other marriages which, though they had been on the brink of disaster, had been saved from ruin.

I listened. "Why is she telling me all this?" I asked myself. "There is nothing like that between Gesa and me! The only difference between us is that Gesa likes sails in the wind, and I like souls in the wind—a difference of two letters!"

Then she asked me about Engel Tiedje and Uncle Peter. She was overjoyed when she heard that the latter was married. "As you know, Holler," she exclaimed, "I am constantly finding occasion to criticize Almighty God and His ways, above all for so seldom giving us the pleasure of seeing the villains of this world burning in hell while we are still alive. I must say it is a pastime of which I am extremely fond—yes, worse luck—if only I could actually see the burning!"

I pointed out that it would not do for this always to happen, for in that case people would do good only out of fear, or for reward, and never for its own sake.

"Yes," she agreed, "you are right, but I don't like to hear you talk so wisely."

When we were at table I again asked about Eva and Ernemann, and heard that Eva was secretary to a learned physician in a little town not far from Chicago, and that Ernemann had found a job on a fruit farm in the neighbourhood. They were both earning such good salaries that in three years' time they would have saved enough to run a fruit farm of their own.

"But when is she coming back?" I exclaimed, my heart aching with longing for the companion of my youth.

"She says nothing about that," Auntie Lena replied, "and I suppose we ought to be pleased, because otherwise the old business with Eilert might start again. Besides, Ernemann may want her over there." And she brushed the tears from her eyes.

We talked about Eilert, and I pointed out to them what an ideal mate Uhle Monk was for him. I did not hide the fact that I regretted the association, but I could not help acknowledging how admirably she suited him. To my surprise both Auntie Lena and Uncle Gosch agreed.

"I certainly always thought you understood his nature," I said, "but I did not know you understood it so well, or that you felt so kindly towards him, in spite of his having spoilt Eva's life. But just think what a blessing it is they never married! If, as we all admit, Uhle Monk is the right mate for him, how could Eva have been?"

Auntie Lena did not answer, but looked silently in front of her. "I always loved him from the time he was a child," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "He used to come to me, first with his little troubles and then with his big ones! And then he got fond of Eva, and, like an old fool, I made plans. But it all ended in smoke. He spent his time with Uhle Monk and her class, and my child was ousted! And I was partly to blame! What a silly schemer I've been! I not only made plans about Eilert, but, in case they fell through, I had a sort of second string to my bow. And that was you! Yes, you! But you were a young donkey—as you have always been—and didn't see how fond she was of you!"

I blushed with embarrassment, pride, and joy. It seemed incredible to me that proud, grown-up Eva could really have been fond of me; and, to cover my confusion, I began telling them my great secret, and, putting my proofs in her hands, mentioned the name of the publishers.

She was obviously dumb with astonishment, and thoroughly bewildered. She had not thought very much of my serial about the copper-mine, but a book bearing the imprint of that famous firm was different. She knew how to hide her feelings, however, and at last, after chaffing me about the unpractical nature of the calling I had adopted, she asked where I had got my artistic capacity from. "You certainly did not get it in this house," she declared.

"It is a gift, my love," observed Uncle Gosch; "he was born with it."

"Yes," she rejoined suspiciously, "but where does it come from?"

"From my parents," I replied.

"From your parents?" she repeated, still looking suspicious. "But your mother's thoughts were always on the grave and your father's up in the clouds; so which of them was it?"

I answered that it was probably both. But she merely raised her eyebrows and reminded me that on this subject she had her own ideas, and would always stick to them. She believed that a certain distinguished old superintendent named Steenbock, who exercised an extraordinary fascination over women, and could tell the most wonderful stories, had once cast his steely eyes upon my mother. That was quite enough to account for it. And she knew that Steenbock had visited us once at the forge.

I replied that I had never heard anything about that.

After supper I went for a stroll through the town alone in the twilight. The day was overcast and the mist was turning to rain. I felt strangely depressed, as though I were weighed down by some terrible burden, and wondered what on earth could be the matter. I tried hard to cheer up and to think of pleasant things—that bright supper-table with the two dear old faces I had just left, my future and the fame it would bring me. But it was no use! The pleasant pictures all sank behind the mist, which was hanging like a cowl over the town, and I trudged on, still badly in need of something to raise my spirits, when suddenly what should I see but Balle Bohnsack's sign on the corner of the market square; so in I went.

While I was not in the least bit surprised to find it the brightest and most spotless butcher's shop I had ever seen, I must confess that I was somewhat taken aback to find the friend of my youth looking so clean and respectable. He had also lost a good deal of his grandfatherly manner; for though he was very pleased to see me he spoke with a certain embarrassment.

I gathered that in order to gratify a craving for his old haunts and associates he contrived once a week to repair to the old taverns near the harbour on the plea of going to inspect some cattle. But the wink he gave me, as he told me this, was not as convincing as of old, and he informed me that he found her kisses and caresses and her "dear Balduins" terribly difficult to resist.

At last he called Dina, who appeared in a dazzling white apron and seemed to be white enamel and polish all over. Evidently she intended to rival her mother's ample proportions, for she was already plumper than when I had last seen her. I said I must see their little boy at once, and as I bent over the baby's snow-white cot she asked me whether I did not think he looked clever, like her father.

"For my part," interposed Balle, "I can see from his nose that he is a regular Bohnsack, and as his favourite toy is a little wooden sheep it isn't difficult to guess what he will be one day."

Looking at me in surprise, she asked whether this could possibly be true, and I suggested that, for all Balle knew, the sheep might be a sign that the boy would one day be a shepherd on the marshes or a shepherd of men.

At this moment customers entered the shop, and I left to call on my Aunt Sarah.

I found her sitting alone at her old place by the window. She was, as usual, wearing a black silk dress and had her thick gold chain round her neck. Her face, though a little coarse, was still beautiful, and if anything more dignified and attractive than when I had last seen her. But when I presented myself before her that evening I felt just as shy and timid as I had done when Auntie Lena first led me by the hand into her presence. She was engaged in telling her own fortune by cards.

I began by informing her that I had come to Ballum on a flying visit, and teased her about her cards, which I said I was afraid were unfavourable that day.

She tried to smile, but failed. Apart from the difficulty she had in being natural she was particularly suspicious of me owing to my sharp eyes; though this very suspicion made her study my expression, and she asked me questions and opened her heart to me. She began by inquiring how the Bornholts were; then, suddenly changing the subject asked whether I had seen Dutti Kohl. Apparently he was in Ballum and called on her from time to time on business.

"He comes here occasionally and discusses business," she observed with a smile, still scrutinizing me closely. "He says old Judge Jensen's advice is old-fashioned. It is a difficult business. People who have no money have no idea how hard it is to manage a fortune."

Annoyed by her constant reference to my lack of means, I replied coldly and carelessly: "I wouldn't trust him, Aunt Sarah. I can't say any more, for as you very rightly observe, being a penniless man, I know nothing about such matters."

At that moment Barbara entered. She was now a fine tall girl of twenty-two, and her brown eyes were full of life and fire. She greeted me with the indifference which always left me to infer that neither as a human being nor as a man did I inspire her with the smallest emotion. She informed us that she had just met Helmut Busch and had a little chat with him.

I had always suspected her of having a weakness for Helmut, and her tone confirmed this impression.

"He has grown into a fine man," she continued in a voice of indignant surprise, "and he holds himself well. He is smart too. But I can't stand him. Just imagine . . . he actually gives himself airs!"

"And why shouldn't he?" I exclaimed scornfully, thinking of myself. "He has made something of himself. Why shouldn't he hold his head up and be smart?"

"Yes, but he's old Busch's son, all the same," she replied. "Besides, he has turned Socialist." And she began truculently to hold forth about Dutti Kohl's flourishing circumstances. Apparently he had invited her and my Aunt Sarah to one of the best restaurants in Hamburg.

"I would far rather sit with Helmut in one of the harbour taverns," I replied, "than have dinner in the most palatial restaurant with Dutti Kohl."

She pondered a moment. "People who have no money always dislike those who have!" her mother observed.

"That's just where you are wrong, Aunt Sarah!" I answered coldly. "I've known Dutti since he was a boy, and all I can say is that far from doing any business with him I would not even sit at the same table with him."

They shrugged their shoulders. I thought of asking about Eilert. But how could I? There were no two people in the whole country who were greater strangers to that dear wild friend of mine than these two women, his nearest relatives! So I stood up and took my leave. They had not asked me a word about my own affairs.

Taking a short cut home, I happened to meet Dutti Kohl in the Lindengang. He was a little embarrassed when he saw me, and explained that although he often came to Ballum his Hamburg business was much more important.

I asked whether the peasants still bought stocks and shares. Putting his great fat arm round me, he admitted that some of them had made rather foolish investments, as many of the shares had gone down, and others were paying no dividends. The bituminous soil had not proved as rich as had been expected, and the best yield, so far, had been due to fraud. It was an unpleasant business, and honest old Dutti had great difficulty in meeting unjustifiable complaints.

I felt certain that he had been involved in the fraud. But I said nothing.

I asked him whether he was doing any business with my aunt.

"Yes," he replied with a pained expression, "but it is difficult, very difficult. She is very suspicious." I suggested that Eilert's absence probably suited his purpose. He agreed, and added that he would never have been able to get a hold over Eilert.

"But you find the two women easier," I replied angrily.

"No, indeed!" he rejoined. "They are very difficult. These old peasant families are as hard as nails. But I have succeeded in persuading them to exchange some meadows which yielded only four per cent. for stocks that pay six and even more."

I observed that I only hoped the stocks were not of the Portuguese variety.

"What does dear little Babendiek know about such things?" he said with a smug laugh, hugging me affectionately. "But to talk of more important matters—my other affair here progresses terribly slowly. However, I have persuaded her and her mother to dine with me."

Just at that moment we saw Barbara pass by in the distance, and I noticed how his arm trembled as it lay across my shoulders.

"She is a fine girl," I said. I suppose I wanted to tease him, for I never for a moment imagined she would marry him.

He was silent for a while, and his arm trembled more than ever. "I wonder whom she will marry!" I said. I wanted to annoy him. I was furious that he should have the impudence even to admire my beautiful and distinguished cousin, let alone love her!

When she had vanished from sight he became somewhat calmer. "If I know old Dutti Kohl," he exclaimed with his old heartless, empty laugh, "there are times when he has the audacity to imagine he might succeed in winning her!"

"If you imagine you can win her with the help of her mother, your business influence, and dinners at swell restaurants, you are mistaken!" I retorted angrily. "She will choose a man of flesh and blood, so it certainly won't be you."

He hugged me tenderly to him, and replied with his usual unctuous sentimentality: "Honest old Dutti Kohl would like to get some pleasure out of life for once."

It nauseated me to listen to his thoughts and plans, so I shook him off and asked him sharply whether he still did business with Fritz Hellebeck.

He shook his head. "He is not reliable enough for me, little Babendiek. No, I don't do business with him any more. Good old Dutti Kohl thinks too highly of his good name!"

Whereupon he informed me that Fritz was now living in grand style in Hamburg. "The fellow is eaten up with vanity—his big house, his friends, his wife, even his business, are all vanity. One day he'll go bankrupt through—vanity!"

In my heart of hearts I agreed with him, and inquired anxiously after his wife.

"A little pale," he replied, "and her gaiety is a little bit forced. But I am sure she loves him and is a little blinder than most women."

I asked what had happened to the farm at Buchholz, and he told me that it was now managed by Fritz's mother, and that the mad half-brother was there too.

"Hans Hellebeck mad?" I protested. "Very far from it!"

He laughed in his foolish way. Had he not eyes, and good ones to boot? And had he not been there just to see how the land lay and find out the conditions on which the property was held?

"They are unfortunately all too clear," I replied.

"On the contrary," he said, "they are far from clear, and the neighbours say that if the mad half-brother liked he could make matters very uncomfortable for Fritz. But what an amiable old lady the mother is!"

"I know her," I replied gloomily.

I was shocked to hear that Hans now lived all alone in the tumbledown cottage in the woods, surrounded by mud and dirt, and had fallen a prey to melancholia or some form of madness. I could not bear to hear Dutti speak of all this as though it was of no consequence, and again shaking myself free I left him.

CHAPTER XXI

I Visit Hans

On the following morning I travelled south. I had not really intended going to Buchholz, but what Dutti had told me had so alarmed me that I wanted to know how things stood. I felt bound to Hans by sad and weighty secrets. His father's mysterious death, the guilt of the man Sören and Frau Hellebeck, Fritz's strange behaviour and his young wife, were all subjects that tormented me; and when I heard that Hans was in trouble I surely had sufficient reason to bestir myself and pay him a visit.

On reaching the farm I found the hall just as it had always been. The young couple had evidently left the large chests behind them when they moved to Hamburg. The dining-room, which I could see through the half-open door, also looked the same, with the stately dark furniture I had known from childhood. As I waited, contemplating the scene about me, Frau Hellebeck came out from a room on the left. She had aged a good deal, and was now quite the old woman. Her well-dressed hair was snow-white; but she still held herself with great dignity.

When she saw who I was, her face suddenly beamed with friendliness, and leading me by the arm into the dining-room she poured forth a torrent of inquiries about my health, my marriage, my work, and my place of abode, calling me her "dear old Babendiek" at least a dozen times. Then in the same fulsome fashion she told me about Almut and Fritz, how comfortably they were living, and how delighted they would be if I went to see them.

I am puzzled even now to know how far she believed her exaggerated statements, but I am inclined to think that she must at least have had some inkling of Almut's state of mind, though she was too false and cunning by nature and too madly infatuated with her son to have any regard whatever for truth. And so she urged me again, "dear good old

Babendiek," to pay them a visit, as I had been such a good friend to them both, particularly to "dear good little Almut," with whom she even believed I was in love.

I blushed and changed the subject by asking after Hans.

Was I right in thinking that the white-haired woman suddenly looked older and more lined? Did her proud, erect bearing suddenly vanish, and an expression of uneasiness and fear enter her regular features? Had the rumours which were constantly circulating in the village and the neighbourhood at last reached her ears? Or did I imagine it all?

With a fresh outburst of fulsome friendliness she reminded me that "dear good old Hans" had always been a little odd, melancholy, slow-witted and . . . uncouth. As long as the young couple had remained at the farm he had not changed, but since they had left things had been very bad with him. He worked hard—yes, he worked like a horse—but he would see no one, and buried himself in the old cottage in the wood.

I said that I had heard all about that, and had come on purpose to see him and would go over to him there and then.

She scrutinized me uneasily, and indirectly tried to prepare my mind for what he might say. Apparently he was apt suddenly to burst out and talk a lot of nonsense. She remembered he had done so once at the betrothal dinner, and she was very much afraid that some day, as the result of all his brooding, he would come out with something absolutely ridiculous. Could I not persuade him to return to his room over the dining-room? It would be doing both him and her a real service. And she looked imploringly at me and showed more genuine feeling than I had ever seen in her face before.

On my way to Hans I came across Sören chopping wood with a farm lad. My greeting seemed to have the effect of making him wield his axe more vigorously than ever, and I stopped to talk to him. I began by warning him not to run the risk of losing his other eye by letting a splinter fly into it, and he replied with staggering calm that it would have been better for some people if he had been blind in both eyes.

I asked him what he meant, but he evaded the question and replied that he had known totally blind people who were quite cheerful, and at least they saw nothing of the world and of life.

"You once cherished a great hope," I suggested, "and were disappointed, weren't you?"

He nodded. "We all cherish hopes, and nothing comes of them," he replied in the same calm tones.

"But you are at home here," I protested, "working on the farm you have been on ever since you were a boy!"

"Yes," he replied, "if only it had a single bright feature about it; but it is all going to pieces, and things get worse and worse every year." These were more or less the words he used; at all events they give his meaning. I was surprised to hear him talk like this. Then, going, as I always did, to the heart of the subject, I said: "Frau Hellebeck is still very lively for a woman of her age. And extraordinarily beautiful too!" I was cruel, but I felt that if he had done that foul deed it had not been to get the farm, but to get that beautiful woman, and I wanted to find out whether my suspicions were correct.

He did not answer, but I thought he went pale.

When I asked him about Fritz he looked contemptuously at me with his one eye and exclaimed: "Him! He is to blame for everything! She has eyes and ears only for him. And there is nothing in him—nothing!"

"That's a pity for his poor young wife," I observed.

"There's nothing here that's not a pity," he replied, "everything's a pity!"

"It's all because the father died too soon," I remarked. "Had he lived Hans would have been given the farm and Fritz would have gone into business, and everything would have been all right. It was a bad job his dying so unexpectedly."

I thought my words would provoke him, but his rough nature knew how to conceal its secret feelings, and turning to his work he murmured something I did not catch, and swung his axe for a mighty blow. Feeling that he did not want to say anything more, I went on my way.

On reaching Hans's broken-down cottage I found the door open and went in, and passing through the gloomy hall, which revived so many memories of my childhood, I entered the living-room. In the old days this room had been quite empty, but it was now furnished with an odd assortment of rickety old pieces of furniture, which had evidently been brought over from the house. There were a table, a few chairs with the straw bursting out of their seats, a desk standing unsteadily on three legs, and, beside the bed, which was built into the wall, was a sort of hanging dresser, which looked as if it might fall down at any moment. On the table there stood a badly chipped cup, which had been used, and an old plate. I stood still for a moment contemplating the grimy sordidness of the scene and listening to the rain which had just begun to fall, and as I stood there I heard heavy footsteps approaching.

I went towards the door and saw Hans returning from the fields in the raggedest and dirtiest of farm-labourer's clothes. With the faint ironical, knowing smile with which he kept the world at arm's-length, he said in his slow, singsong voice, which seemed to hail from the depths of his great solitude: "It is decent of you to come and look me up like this in my lair." Then, going to the kitchen, he lit a fire, opened a cupboard, and placed two cups on the table.

I could not help noticing how bent and old he looked and how wild his hair and how dirty his face and hands were. I thought of Almut and marvelled at the vagaries of human taste, which could make the sunniest and most refined creature in the countryside the friend of such a lout. "If she were to see him now," I thought, "it would be all over. He would disgust her."

Meanwhile I told him about my wife, Engel Tiedje, and my literary work, and then, turning to his affairs, I remonstrated with him for living more wretchedly than the poorest in the land when he was the son of a rich farmer.

His smile slowly vanished. "I could not live up at the farm any longer," he replied with a gravity that was stirring in its simplicity. "While the little one was there I could bear it; but after that was all over I could not stand the great empty house. There seemed to be bad air in every room, Otto, my boy."

"Particularly in the dining-room," I suggested.

He nodded and smiled faintly once more.

"You had a view of the whole room as a boy that time, didn't you?" I asked.

He smiled. "Yes, through the hole in the floor."

"And you saw the man Sören throttle your sick father," I exclaimed with the fierce wrath I still feel when I think of his smile.

"Did I?" he replied slowly and still smiling. "Do you think so?"

"I don't know!" I cried, outraged by his calmness and even more by his voice. "I should like to believe that you are the truest and most serious of men. But I sometimes doubt whether there is anything serious in you, when you can say these terrible things with such smiling indifference."

His expression became confused. "If I did not play with myself a little," he rejoined with quivering lips, "how could I help going mad?"

I apologized.

"I was only a little boy, Otto, and it was growing dark; I can't swear to what I saw," he continued. Then after a pause he added: "But he's going to the dogs. He's suffering."

"And isn't it only right that he should?" I cried.

"If he really did it, Otto," he replied, "was it really so bad?"

"Really so bad?" I repeated, utterly dumbfounded.

He then began to discuss the secret forces which sometimes seize upon a man's soul and compel him to a deed he cannot help. Must there not be good and evil in the world? What would life be without good and evil? All life was full of light and shade, and the play of the two produced colour. Who was to judge these things? "Thousands of people carry secrets in their souls," he added, "and have to live with these secrets, just as I have, if I really have such a secret. I was only nine years old and it was growing dark! But you see I need not mix with men, because I am the son of a farmer and inherited this tumbledown old cottage from my mother."

"Yes, but this life is lying too heavy on your heart, Hans Hellebeck!" I cried, filled with love and solicitude. "This life that you are leading, like a lonely beast of the field, is proof enough of the enormity of that man's crime."

"It is a little hard, Otto," he replied slowly and softly. "First of all that business about my father, which I have been brooding over ever since I was a child. Think of it—ever since I was a child! In fact it prevented me from ever being a child! And then came the business with Fritz. I thought he was worthy of admiration. But that too was a mistake. And now, ever since he has been in Hamburg, he has been loading the farm with debt. He will lose it next. And it was my mother's farm, and it is good land. And what will become of the little girl when she finds it all out one day? She is so sunny and divine. It will be terrible! I can only help by standing aloof, and living alone in this house, in which my mother and Almut's mother used to play together as children. I must go on living; for to leave life before God calls is too difficult."

As we left the cottage together I asked him whether he knew how Almut was getting on.

He shook his head and said nothing, and when I suggested how glad she would be to see him he replied softly that we must not fetch her, we must not even call her. And his face was full of such cruel longing that I was obliged to turn my eyes away.

I felt that she alone could help him; but I knew that he was right, and that I must not summon her. I must not even tell her of his deep distress.

When we reached the spot where a few moments previously I had spoken to Sören, Frau Hellebeck came towards us from the farm. "Well, my dear good old Hans," she said, "wasn't it a pleasant surprise? . . . Have you had a good talk?"

"I have not been very lucky to-day," I replied. "The few words I had with Sören led us on to the most serious topics, and the same thing happened with Hans."

She looked calmly at me, and I was convinced that she knew what I meant. But she was such an adept at feigning affability, in which she encased herself like armour, that the heaviest thrusts made no impression. And such was the glamour of her personality and the graciousness of her smile that I abandoned my aggressive intentions and replied in friendly tones that, as I felt tired and depressed after my talk with her stepson, I should prefer not to return to the farm, but would go straight back to the town.

. . . . .

When my new novel first appeared in November of that year it was hardly noticed amid the flood of new books, and I did not have my attention called to any criticism of importance. In the February of the following year, however, there appeared simultaneously in two large and reputable journals a critical essay on the book by a well-known young reviewer, who praised my work to the skies, and warmly recommended it to the public, and I received congratulatory letters from the publishers, together with all kinds of good news.

Gesa was strangely suspicious—all the more so because, although she made the most touching efforts to understand, she had not the faintest idea what it all meant. She stayed at home a whole day—a thing she had never done before—turning over the pages of the manuscript and the printed book, and casting covert glances from time to time at my face, as I sat at my desk answering letters, doing her utmost to glean something from my expression. But I could see from the questions she asked that the whole affair was quite beyond her grasp, and that as a creature gifted with common sense and no imagination she could make nothing of it. At last, towards evening, she sprang to her feet, kissed me more timidly and less confidently than usual, and got ready to leave the house. I knew that she intended going to her people, to discuss the matter with them, particularly with her father, as in all practical questions she did not take her mother quite seriously. As I had finished my letters I decided to go with her.

On entering the house I was more than usually conscious of the poverty-stricken appearance of the living-room, and, seeing my mother-in-law busy as usual with her lace-making, I remembered that she probably did a little business with her handiwork and thus helped to make both ends meet. But as she sat there stiff and straight in front of her lace-making frame I could not help feeling how much I loved her just as I had loved her from the first hour of our acquaintance; and going up to her with a beaming face I said I felt sure he was as delighted as I was at the success of my book.

She nodded and congratulated me. She had read the book twice, but her husband had no taste for such things. She had only one fault to find—it was too full of sadness and brooding.

I wanted to discuss it with her, but she got on to the subject of her brother in furthest Ind, and was assuring me that he would certainly buy ten or a dozen copies, since money, of course, was no object to him.

I felt tempted to raise her thin industrious hands to my lips and to implore her to give up thinking of that brother in India, who had long ago forgotten both her and her children; if she must have a marvel to think about, let her think about me, who was a marvel close at hand. But I was too shy and said nothing.

Then my father-in-law entered, in his usual get-up. Although I had one or two secret grudges against him, I could not help liking him, and going forward to greet him I said I hoped he was pleased at what had happened.

He pressed my hand. "Of course I am pleased, my boy!" he replied in his breezy, youthful way. "You know I don't think much of all this quill-driving, because none of it is real, but all the same . . ."

I was a little bit annoyed by the word 'quill-driving,' but I hid my feelings. "But to many intelligent and thoughtful people," I observed, "quill-driving brings the greatest joy; it is a sort of revelation of life to them."

Yes, he knew that. He had only one suggestion to make —that I should lay more stress on family life in my books, and depict a well-regulated household, "for the family and its harmonious working is the cell . . ."

He was about to hold forth when my mother-in-law interrupted him by saying that the balance at the bank required looking into, and he replied that he would see to it.

As to my brothers-in-law—the one at the Town Hall in Hamburg and the accountant in Glückstadt—the former had certainly been told by the Mayor that he had heard of my book. "But what time have we to think of life, my dear vom Gang," he added, "when we have our hands full governing the city!" The accountant, after informing me that his wife, who came of very good family, thought my book ought to open the doors of many fine houses to me, led me aside and to my astonishment asked me to lend him twenty marks, which I promptly did.

My mother-in-law seemed quite pleased with her sons' remarks, and my father-in-law, who had now quite recovered from his embarrassment about the bank balance, smiled and winked at me as of old. Meanwhile Gesa's eyes wandered from one to the other of the company, without finding an answer to the riddle that was puzzling her. Finally they settled on me with that expression of mingled love, anxiety, and distress with which a mother might be expected to take leave of her son.

Gesa and I spent much of our time together during the next few days, and every minute of that brief period we were completely one in heart and soul. And, my God, what plans we made! How youth loves making plans! What a voluptuous pastime it was! It all began with the idea that we must buy a house. And then it suddenly struck us that we could live anywhere we liked now. Was I not a free man, an author? Were not paper and ink obtainable everywhere?

But all this was mere make-believe; for while we were discussing the merits of one place and another each of us felt, though for different reasons, that we could not stir very far from the river on the banks of which we were discussing our plans—I because I felt I was already too far from Stormfeld, although it was only about twelve miles downstream, and Gesa because to leave the Elbe was unthinkable.

So, having decided to remain in Övelgönne, we began to discuss what we should buy with our money; for naturally it never occurred to us to leave it in the bank. I suggested that I should give my mother-in-law a new dress, as she had not had one for seven years, and asked Gesa to think of something she could give her father. As for Engel Tiedje, I said I would buy him a new pipe and a new suit of clothes.

She said I must also get something for Uhle and Auntie Lena, and asked me what I was going to buy for myself.

My choice was books; but when I asked her what she would like I could not help looking round our extremely barely furnished room—a friend afterwards told me that he had never seen such poverty—and it occurred to me that we might do something to make it more comfortable.

Hardly had the thought crossed my mind, however, when in faltering tones she came out with the wish which I felt sure had been agitating her the whole time—would the money be enough to buy a new set of sails?

In my excitement over all that had happened I had forgotten all about her boat and the Elbe, and in any case could never bring myself to take more than a half-hearted interest when she spoke about either. But I was pleased to be able to gratify her, and, kissing her, replied with laughing eyes: "Of course, my child! But, tell me, didn't you say there was something wrong with the boat? What was it? How much does a boat like that cost?" I had not the faintest idea, nor did I care. The question interested me about as much as the price of a donkey skin.

But she was beside herself with joy. Never had I seen her look at me with an expression so beatific! From that moment she talked of nothing else and had no other thought in her mind. Like a young seal making its first acquaintance with dry land, she had made a cautious and timid attempt to accustom herself to strange surroundings; but now she was back in her natural element, and that very evening she went over to her father to discuss the matter with him. She now spent half her time at the boat-builder's, or on the river, studying and discussing other boats, and was extremely distressed when she bade farewell to her little boat, the faithful friend of her youth. Once more she became quite undomesticated.

Meanwhile I myself had little peace. Discovered and unearthed by my contemporaries, I was importuned, bombarded, and harassed from morning to night.

Begging letters were not the worst of the evils I had to endure, although they absorbed time and money enough in all conscience. But, strange to say, I even had trouble with Engel Tiedje. The exaggerated accounts of my earnings which had been circulated in Stormfeld induced many of the local inhabitants to come to the forge and urge Engel to appeal to me on their behalf. In his kindly childlike way he proceeded to do so, begging me to settle any number of worthy workmen on their own plots of land.

He wrote the most enthusiastic letters to me about these people and their wants, and although I did what little lay in my power I gave him a complete account of my takings up to date to prove that I could not do more.

But worst of all were the crowds who came hoping to see me. In my simplicity I at first believed that they were all seriously in need of spiritual guidance; but this was true only of a very few. Old Professor Dohrn, who was engaged in biological work in Naples, wrote to me reminding me of Goethe's words—"When a man by his work has rendered a service to his fellow creatures, everything is done to prevent him from doing so a second time." I was grateful to him for the warning and the advice, but I don't think I stood in need of either. My ship had too deep a keel and was too heavily laden to be easily diverted from its course. In secret I may have indulged in a certain amount of tremulous, exalted, and not altogether innocuous self-applause, but I went quietly on my way notwithstanding. As a Northerner I could not be satisfied with the materialistic explanation of my success, regarding it as due to certain convolutions in the grey matter of my brain; my soul saw and longed to see in all that had happened the manifestation of some will-power, some miracle, grace, or guidance on the part of certain unseen forces, and I was therefore filled not only with a sense of modesty and a belief in protection from above, but also with a feeling of heavy and terrifying responsibility.

In the evenings, after I had had a hard day's work, Gesa would come home and tell me all about her boat, and I would listen. But I felt in her eyes, and in the timid accents of her dear voice, that her doubt and anxiety regarding my interest in these things had increased and were oppressing her more than ever.

Truth to tell I was not in the least bit interested. But I had to pretend to be. Often before in my life I had had to play the hypocrite, and I was obliged to do so then. But ever since I had lived with Gesa I had perfected myself in the part. With a smile of feigned interest on my lips I interposed remarks which I tried to make as relevant as possible, and did everything that kindly feeling prompted. But it was very hard. Anybody can pretend now and again, but to be obliged to do so always and with one's nearest and dearest was a thankless task!

Once tentatively, very tentatively, I suggested that we might go away together, to some place where we should be quite alone. I hoped this might help us to return to a more honest and truthful attitude towards each other, a relationship more consonant with spiritual dignity. I said I longed either for the oblivion and solitude of a great city or else the peaceful life of a village, where I could find a background for the pictures in my mind. I argued that I must live either in the heart of Hamburg and hobnob with cabmen who had been driving for the last fifty years across the Jungfernstieg, and with business men, or else I must live in Weimar or Wunsiedel.

But at this point she ceased to understand, and, frowning in the direction of the river, looked for a sail.

"I think I ought to live, and indeed would like to live, in Ballum or Stormfeld," I continued. . . . "One can go for good sails from those places too."

"But you'll soon get that idea out of your head, won't you?" she replied hesitatingly, looking at me with wide-open, anxious eyes. "After all it can't really matter to you where you live!"

How frightened she looked!

No . . . no . . . it was no good! . . . Because we could not take the Elbe with us! Life would be impossible without Schweinesand and Finkenwärder, and Brunsbüttel corner, and Stieglmayr's café, and without the beautiful broad valley through which the river flows!

CHAPTER XXII

I Go into Society: Almut

EVEN some of Gesa's "boys" who had hitherto ignored me because I never went sailing now began to approach me in the capacity of brothers of the pen, and one in particular, who had tried his hand at poetry and married a rich manufacturer's daughter, asked us to visit him and his wife at their country house in Othmarschen. I had some difficulty in persuading Gesa to make herself a new frock for the occasion; for, apart from the fact that she lived all her life in sailing clothes, she was suspicious of any venture unconnected with boats. However, she bought some material of a beautiful blue shade, and set to work to make herself a dress with her famous long stitches. I warned her that if her frock fell down at the party she would not have a crowd of kind friends to stand round her, as she had had in church on her wedding-day, while she fastened it up again. But she told me to calm my fears, and said she would hide as many safety-pins as she could all over my evening dress. And when we left home we were each armed with a goodly supply of these safeguards.

It was a fine house, and the company consisted of smart young people, chiefly married couples of good family, well bred and affable. They discussed my book a little, and then one after the other came modestly forward with their own productions—poems, one-act plays, drawings, and musical compositions. Gesa's clear, quick, sea-pirate's eyes glanced hither and thither, and then settled inquiringly on me. She seemed surprised and frightened lest somebody should ask her what she thought. But in her cool simple features they saw no understanding of these things, and spared her. Bottles of wine, wine-glasses, and cakes now stood among a litter of manuscripts, sketch-books, and music. The company grew more lively, laughter began to ring out, cigarettes to glow, and the young artists began teasting one another.

Suddenly the parlourmaid appeared and whispered something in our host's ear. He turned pale. "My father-in-law is coming," he said uneasily, and springing to his feet went to the door.

There was a general commotion. Most of those present prepared to take their leave, and went over to the door. "Must you go so soon?"

"Yes . . . yes . . . we were just on the point of going."

"Yes . . . well . . . perhaps it's better. He's so peculiar. . . ."

Gesa and I alone remained.

The old man came in, slightly bent and white-haired, but with bright youthful eyes. "Well, my dear boy," he observed, glancing round the room, "so you've been having a little party, have you?"

"Yes, Father. We have had a few friends here. Have a drink, won't you?"

The old man declined, and his son left the room to take leave of his guests.

Meanwhile the father-in-law and I got on grandly together. He saw at once in my eyes that I had suffered bitterly, and, declaring that only people who had had my experience could write books, began to scoff at the band of would-be artists I had just met.

He pleased me immensely, and I did my utmost, even after the son came back, to humour him by talking like a man well versed in business matters. But as I found this somewhat exhausting after a time, I took an early opportunity of bidding them both good-bye.

On the way home I felt called upon to keep up the pose I had adopted at the house just a little while longer, and after praising the father-in-law and assuring Gesa that he was also singing my praises at that moment I expressed my views concerning the various social questions the old man and I had touched upon.

Gesa was happy. She felt clear about things for once, and was proud of me; and as we drew near home she was exquisitely charming to me.

A day or two later we called on the Sooths. Apparently

Paul was still having difficulties with the peasants about his youngest brother, but he had addressed a letter of complaint to the Sheriff, and hoped that in the spring all would be well, and that the boy would come to them in Hamburg. He was also feeling some anxiety about his second sister, who was ill and working at a baker's. But he said he would ride out to her the next day on his bicycle, and as this would save expense he would give her the money his fare would have cost.

I was much moved by his faithful love for his brothers and sisters, and asked him whether it did not make his wife jealous. But he protested that she only laughed, and was forced to admit that he and his family seemed to have a peculiar faculty for making her laugh.

Paul and his wife then insisted that we should go with them to a large party to which they had been invited and at which everybody was welcome, and she was so pressing that we agreed to join them. It was a Bohemian affair, where, among other people, I met my old school rival in literature, the fellow I had compared to Goethe; and towards the end of the evening who should drop in, with a number of other artists, but Eilert Mumm.

A tall girl sitting beside us, whom I had once seen at my editorial offices in Altona, gave a little cry of joy and relief at the sight of him, and it struck me that she had probably come to the party only in the hope of meeting him.

He turned his huge peasant's head towards us, and came to greet us with a smile of pleased surprise in his eyes. Apparently he had just arrived from Holland to paint a portrait and hold an exhibition of some of his pictures. He congratulated me on the success of my book, asked Gesa how she got on with the hypocritical humbug that I was, and smiled eloquently at her when she blushed. Then, seizing the tall girl's hand and laying it on his arm in his free-and-easy way, he assured her that he had come on purpose to see her.

She drew herself up and looked at him full of bewilderment and joy. "Don't let us stay here any longer," he said, and turning to us he added: "I shall come and look you up either to-morrow or the day after."

We left together, but in the search for our coats became separated. When Gesa looked about for the couple on the steps outside they had vanished. "Where have they got to now?" she exclaimed wistfully.

I shrugged my shoulders. "That's Eilert Mumm all over," I replied.

"Heavens!" she cried. "That girl comes from a good family! If her mother only knew!"

But no, these social functions were no good for me! There was too much empty show about them, too little to learn, and too much waste of time. They ruined the sacred freshness of my mornings for me, and disturbed my silent contemplation of the souls of my fellow-men.

. . . . .

Eilert never turned up after all, but a charming little note arrived from Almut to say that she had read my book with great joy, that she felt very proud at the thought of being my oldest friend, and wanted to see me. She ended up by asking me to take Gesa to dinner with her and Fritz on the following day, and presumed that I had told my wife all about her.

The house was a fairly large one in Winterhude, built in the pretentious purse-proud style peculiar to the period just before the Great War. The hall was lofty, oppressive, and unhomely. It had a large red brick fireplace standing opposite an old altar-piece taken from some village church, and in the centre was a vast table, covered with bottles of liqueur, huge cigars, and flowers. I was conscious of the ostentatious formality of the place, and felt that neither my erstwhile friend nor the beloved playmate of my youth fitted into the surroundings.

Fritz Hellebeck, in a smart dinner-jacket, came majestically forward to meet us. What wonderful assurance! What vanity in the smile on his fine handsome face!

He paused after he had greeted us, no doubt because he expected me to congratulate him on his success, his house, and his fine hall.

He had been my idol, and as I looked at his charming features, beaming with self-assurance, I was again conscious of his power over me, though I fought against it and conquered it. For I remembered the foul patches beneath that smooth surface. Without returning his smile I said I was particularly glad of the opportunity of seeing Almut again and of introducing my wife to her, and hoped they would get on well together.

I noticed that he gave a little start, and a subtle expression of ineffable pride and disdain came into his handsome face. At this moment another guest arrived and he had to introduce us. He was an Englishman of about forty, though in appearance he might well have been a German from the country. Indeed, I discovered later that he actually was a farmer. When Fritz had sufficiently recovered from his pique he informed us that Mr Crawley was the brother of an English peer.

As I was younger than the other two men, and the fame my novel had won me had undermined rather than increased my self-confidence, I assumed the attitude of a reserved and respectful observer, accepting the stranger's rank without question. But when I glanced at Gesa I noticed that, unlike myself, she had remained quite unmoved, and was coldly observing the Englishman out of the corners of her eyes, until, allowing her glance to wander round the room, it lighted upon a picture of a ship on the high seas.

Meanwhile Fritz informed me that he and the Englishman wished to go to Cuxhaven and Duhnen together. "You will be shown everything of interest," he said, turning to Mr Crawley. "As an ex-Uhlan, I think I can explain most things to you. I don't think we'll say you are English, otherwise we might have difficulties."

I fancied that the Englishman did not look altogether pleased; but touching my hand in the most simple and friendly way, he said: "That sounds suspicious; but an old artillery sergeant may be forgiven for wanting to go with a friend to see all the old things again."

I hinted that he looked so German and spoke the language so well that no one would take him for an Englishman.

"My mother was German," he replied with some pride—or was it defiance?

As the conversation was becoming somewhat strained, I was relieved when another guest arrived, a Captain Dierksen, a business man. He had a breezy, swaggering air, and smacking Fritz on the shoulder asked where Almut was, exclaiming that although Fritz was a damned good-looking fellow, his wife cut him out completely.

Fritz assured him that Almut had been inquiring about him and was delighted at the thought of seeing him. He did not seem to be surprised. "All women are the same!" he cried. "They are delighted when I come, and cry when I go. You'll be just the same," he added, turning to Gesa with a laugh.

Other guests arrived, and at last Almut appeared, looking radiant in a dress of blue silk and lace. I saw at once that she was still quite girlish, and that there was little either of the woman or the mother about her. She hardly gave us time to greet her, but leading Gesa and me to the other end of the hall sat down and immediately started a friendly chat with us alone.

I gathered that she had heard about Hans living alone and was worried. I told her that I had been to see him quite recently, and although I tried to upset her as little as possible I was obliged to admit that he seemed rather low, both physically and mentally. But I avoided giving her any explanation of his condition.

I could see she was deeply distressed and also suspicious. She said she had begun to see things more clearly since she had grown up, and remembered that I too had wondered why he was treated so badly by his stepmother and always depreciated, when he was cleverer than all the rest of them put together. Then she proceeded to ask me what I thought of Fritz, and whether I considered that he and his mother had dealt honestly by Hans, to whose mother the farm had once belonged. She said she had been alone a good deal of late, and had had time to think things over. And she questioned me again about Fritz, saying she could not quite make him out, and adding that she felt suspicious about his friends, Dutti Kohl, Mr Crawley the Englishman, and the business man with the wild eyes. "My heart thumps," she exclaimed, "whenever he looks at me!"

Presently she took Gesa and me into the next room. "I can't tell you what I think, Almut," I said. "If I were to be shot to-morrow, I could not tell you! You must keep your eyes open, and gradually find out how the land lies.

But you must insist on going to see Hans and helping him. You are the only person who can help him!"

Evidently she saw by my expression how perturbed I was about our dear friend, for she turned horrified towards me and was just going to say something or ask a question when Fritz came up, with a look of dignified reproach on his face. "You must show yourself, my child!" he exclaimed. "Captain Dierksen has asked after you three times, and you know I want to do business with him." He spoke with that air of superb indifference which I knew so well, as if the matter, though extremely important, was not really of much consequence to him. But he did not look at me. He knew I was secretly at loggerheads with him, and felt ill at ease in my presence, for he only felt happy and secure when everybody about him was smiling and pleasant.

As we went in to dinner I noticed that Dutti Kohl was among the guests. The meal was very elaborate, course following course, and by the time dessert was served the conversation all round the table had become very lively. Dutti Kohl, who was sitting next to Gesa, talked to me about Buchholz, and was whispering all kinds of scandal about Frau Hellebeck. He was convinced, like everybody else, that she had murdered her husband, and that Hans either knew it or suspected it. "Isn't she a wonderful woman?" he exclaimed. "There's a mother who has done something for her boy, if you like! But as for the boy himself! Just look! He has placed his lovely wife next to that Captain Dierksen! Any other husband would have protected her against him! But he is a mass of vanity! As for business—never, as long as he lives, will Fritz Hellebeck do any business, or understand the beginnings of it! All he wants to do is to scrape acquaintance with Captain Dierksen's sister, who is related by marriage to a good old Hamburg family! But he won't succeed. He'll only succeed in making himself a beggar. When the farm has been mortgaged up to the chimneys, which will happen in about two years' time, then expect the crash!"

I glanced towards the other end of the table. Almut was sitting next to Captain Dierksen, with Fritz opposite them; and Dierksen, with eyes full of boastful laughter, was telling dubious, not to say distinctly risky, stories. He thrust his great clean-shaven face quite close to Almut's, and laughed provocatively at her. I could see that, big and handsome though Hellebeck was, he had not known how to awaken the woman in his wife, and that the great hulking fellow at her side was terrifying and fascinating her, and flirting with her quite heavily. For he understood women, and also knew how the land lay. In fact, the way he was courting her, under the very nose of her husband and of us all, was positively shameless, and revealed the bottomless contempt he felt for every one present.

When we rose from table Fritz, who, though not joining in, had taken care to listen to their conversation, urged his wife to take Captain Dierksen into another room and show him a picture of the farm and the Dean's house; and she tripped off with him in her charming fairylike way.

A little while later Dierksen returned alone, and I noticed that his face was pale and that he looked crestfallen and uncomfortable. Going up to a group who were chatting together, he stood there, quite unlike his usual self, not saying a word, and I saw him biting his lips.

I suspected that something had happened, and Gesa and I went into the next room. As Almut was not there we continued our search, and found her in a simply furnished little sitting-room beyond. She had flung herself into a chair, and, pale as death, was gasping for breath. As soon as we appeared she told us with quivering lips all that had happened.

The brute had actually assaulted her, bitten her on the arm like a wild beast! She was utterly at a loss to understand how such an outrage was possible. "Fritz . . . Fritz wanted this to happen!" she blurted out. "He tried once before to leave me alone with the brute. . . . Now I know why. . . . Oh, if only Hans were here!" Then, shaking in every limb and burying her face in her hands, she cried: "The man is so wild and so handsome! It is all so new to me! I can't think what's come over me. But I know this. . . . I am going to Hans the first thing to-morrow."

I pleaded with her not to go like that all of a sudden. I said I would write to Hans first, so that he could get things straight before she arrived.

She did not at first understand to what extent he was roughing it in the cottage. She only knew that her present life was a tissue of lies, and that she had lost faith in her husband and his mother.

When I tried to describe how Hans was living and told her how careless he was about his clothes and his food, instead of deterring her, my words had the contrary effect, and confirmed her determination to go to him at once. She confessed that she did not love her husband, that her mother-in-law had talked her into marrying him, and was responsible for everything. She saw it all now—how Frau Hellebeck's love for Fritz had made her humiliate Hans—and she knew that she herself did not love Fritz. Her experience with that brute had given her an idea of what love was, and had taught her that all the time she had really loved only Hans. She must go to him!

Again I tried to dissuade her, emphasizing the confusion in which he lived. But it was no good. Gnashing her teeth, she repeated that she must go to him. "I shall kneel before him," she exclaimed, "and wash him myself!"

At that moment Fritz appeared at the door; but as our faces were in shadow he did not see how agitated we all were. In his kindest and most condescending tones he told her that she was wanted again.

She winced when she heard his voice, and standing close to my shoulder exclaimed in frightened tones: "You and your mother have not told me the truth about Hans. . . . He is miserable. . . . He has always been miserable, and it's all through you and your mother. . . ."

Fritz's handsome face grew grave. He could not tolerate anything that disturbed or darkened his life. "Did you tell her that, Babendiek?" he inquired reproachfully.

I shook my head. "All I have told her is that Hans is living in the cottage in the wood," I replied, "and that she cannot go to him as she wants to."

She then returned to her charges. Why had she been forced to give Fritz her meadows? Why had he sent her into a room alone with that handsome man who had fallen upon her like a beast of prey? She had begun to see everything more clearly. She did not love him. She felt nothing for him. But Hans was in trouble and living in filth and poverty, and she loved him. "Your mother has driven me quite mad," she added, beating her little hands on her breast, "ever since my earliest childhood, with her sickening chatter! It was always Fritz, Fritz, Fritz . . . But Hans was half-witted, your plaything, your slave! . . ." And she proceeded to call for Hans, declaring that she loved him. Then suddenly tearing off her dress, she vowed she would fly to him that moment. "Anything to get away from you, you hairdresser's model, you picture postcard!"

Fritz had turned very pale, but he still maintained his dignity. Nay, he was more dignified, gracious, and condescending than ever. "I don't wish to prevent you," he said; "but remember you will be very poor!"

"Do you mean to say you are going to stop in all this luxury," I exclaimed, "with those two quite poor? You know perfectly well that the farm comes from Hans's mother, and the meadows were Almut's."

"I'm afraid I can't help that!" he replied with calm urbanity. "My business obligations alone . . . and the law is on my side."

I flared up. His sanctimonious tone was too much for me. "Yes," I cried, in a choking voice, "yes, that is you all over! That's just how you spoke when you let your little playmate down over the fish ponds, when you left me in the lurch after taking the money from my uncle's desk, and when you ruined Ernemann by stealing that money too. The law is always on your side, because it does not probe deeply enough into men's hearts and souls. You sacrifice everybody to your vanity!"

I knew he would not fly at me. On the contrary, he remained cool and haughty, expressed his pity for us all, referred to my powers of imagination which were notorious, and, turning calmly to Almut, said he hoped we should all leave the house quietly without any fuss. Then, wheeling round on his heel, he left the room and closed the door gently behind him.

Almut's haste to get away positively terrified Gesa and me. Hardly an hour elapsed before she had packed all her things and she and her child were driving with us to

Övelgönne. And on the following morning I accompanied the two of them to Buchholz.

On the way I tried to explain to her what the real life of the people at the farm had been, and I saw that she had never had the smallest inkling of the truth. I told her about the sudden death of the father, and of the suspicions that were current in the neighbourhood. I also enlightened her about the character of Frau Hellebeck, her own grandfather the Dean, the man Sören, and Fritz.

We reached Buchholz at dusk, hired a fly to take us to the village, and, following the same track through the woods that we had once taken as children, made our way to Hans's cottage.

As we approached it I noticed to my relief that there was a light behind the dirty little window, and, stumbling over the rough ground, we drew near and peered into the room.

Hans was sitting there alone, dressed in his dirty ragged working clothes, poring over a book. His long face, with its simple stolid features and its large mouth, looked very thin, and was covered with a few days' growth of beard. He seemed to be deeply absorbed in what he was reading, and his lips moved. After a while he stood up, and as he stared blankly in front of him we could see how deep was his despair and how complete the shipwreck of his soul. Almut was sobbing quietly.

I knocked at the window.

How he started! Then we went round to the door, and as he did not seem to be coming I knocked again. At last he opened the door, and there was fear in his voice as he asked who was there. It struck me that he could not have been far from a mental breakdown when we arrived.

When I told him he uttered a groan of astonishment or horror and fancied he saw ghosts. And it was only when Almut called to him, and I repeated my name a little angrily, that he let us in.

And I stood by and saw how Almut, forgetting all the refinement and brilliance of her past life, and even the child she had brought with her, flung herself into the arms of that great, gaunt, ragged, and dirty man, who was almost half-witted, and immediately blossomed into womanhood as she did so; experiencing more in that half-hour than she had done during the whole of the twenty-six years of her life. She had come to fling herself in anguish on her knees before him, to beg forgiveness for all the wrong she had done him and others, to sit by his bed and to watch over him while he slept. But as she stood clasped in his arms her emotions got the better of her, and the bite she could still feel on her arm fanned them to flame. Seizing his great tousled head between her hands, and nestling against him, she kissed him passionately again and again, repeating that she was his and that she was in heaven. And then I heard Hans Hellebeck—who, though a man of thirty-five, had never known a woman, and whose soul was half-buried beneath years of lonely brooding—I heard his heart awaken, and in the intoxication of the moment suddenly give utterance to the sublimest nonsense! . . . Yes, I saw all this. . . . For men are flesh and blood, and though this may account for all the evil in them it also accounts for all that is beautiful as well.

But the child began to cry, and, looking round the room, asked for some hot milk. Hans and I went into the kitchen, and as we busied ourselves with the fire I told him what had happened. "You might have had her from the first!" I concluded indignantly. "She loved you and nobody else. But you were a sleepy old donkey of a Low Saxon!"

He did not answer, but remained buried in thought. When the milk was ready he went back to her, while I remained in the kitchen and put some water on the fire. A little later when I went in to them I found him sitting on the edge of his bed with Almut asleep in his arms, and the child sleeping on the easy-chair in the blankets she had brought with her.

I reminded him of a former occasion when they had sat opposite me in a similar position. He nodded, and there was a light in those deep-set eyes of his which only a moment before had looked so desperate. I felt certain that for the last quarter of an hour he had scarcely breathed so as not to disturb her. "She knows all!" he whispered, and his large mouth remained open in anxious astonishment.

"She had already come to the end of her tether with him," I replied, "so I felt justified in telling her everything."

"Then she is mine," he exclaimed, "and will stay with me?"

I nodded.

"And all the King's horses and all the King's men shan't take her from me," he added.

I urged him to clean himself up and get some decent clothes, and scolded him generally. I saw that it did him good, for his deep-set eyes looked quite calmly at me.

I promised I would give him some money to buy things with, and told him he must have some more cows, and do everything in his power to get his little property in order. "Don't break her up in your great bony hands," I concluded angrily, "and don't devour her with your oven of a mouth!"

He smiled.

Yes, he actually smiled!

And when I saw that I shook hands with him and left.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Difficult Interview

WHEN I think of this period I shake my head in sad surprise, for I was not leading a proper life at all. And yet I could change nothing, first of all because of a kink in my own nature, and secondly because I gave way too much to Gesa.

Unfortunately I was in too great a hurry and tried to do too much all at once. I ought to have taken my time; I also needed peace. But I was too young to know this. I was always creating trouble for myself.

I used to worry about people and mix myself up in their affairs and try to help them, doing more harm than good, I fancy. An artist should leave such things alone, or else delegate his charitable duties to some other person. But I undertook everything myself, and at least three-quarters of the time acted ill-advisedly—with what disastrous consequences to myself!

My fellow-creatures, moreover, pestered me to death, always pressing me to join them in something or other. But I derived no pleasure from their entertainments; I did not require such things. Then Gesa would invite me to go sailing. But I found it either horribly boring or unspeakably exasperating. I also allowed myself to be inveigled into other distasteful escapades, selling my soul for hours or days at a time. I had not yet learnt that what really gave me pleasure was to indulge in leisurely soul-to-soul talks, and listen to anything people had to tell me about themselves, whether sad or gay, as I watched the kaleidoscopic movement of human existence enthralled.

I often sat up till all hours of the night over religious and philosophic works, and would wander from the most up-to-date thought—Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and the new theology—back to the original sources of our culture—Plato, Seneca, and the Gospels. Everywhere I sought food and nourishment for my soul, but for bread more often than not found a stone, and was never quite satisfied. But what pains I took! How I pondered, and what ground I covered!

I was very unhappy, though I did not know why. I was in chains, and knew it not. Sometimes I felt I must set myself free, but the desire was not strong enough to translate itself into action. . . . I had no proper life, no real, true life.

Meanwhile Gesa went sailing! The new boat had merely served to whet her appetite, and all that she and the "boys" seemed to aim at was to break all records! These things were beyond me, but I picked up bits of information here and there when I happened to hear them talking. Thus when I was alone with Gesa I used to warn her about the risks she ran; but I could not help feeling that she hardly heard what I said.

I am afraid I was very weak where she was concerned, and the fact that I had a little money proved our undoing. As I could afford to pay a neighbour to do our housework, and had my meals at an inn close by, Gesa was free to spend nearly the whole day on the Elbe. And if, as rarely happened, she chanced to be sitting at home with me, making herself a cheap dress with her usual inordinately long stitches, her head would turn to the window at the slightest gust of wind, and a look come into her eager eyes, as though she had heard a call; whereupon off she would go to the river again.

If only she had been happy!—it was my dearest wish that she should be; if only she and I could have derived some sort of contentment from this mode of life! But we didn't. Others might have done so, but we did not. We tormented each other. While our passion for each other remained unchanged, in everything else there was constraint; we no longer spoke to each other open-heartedly, but picked our words. If she mentioned her boat, or the wind, or Heligoland, she would make a start and then grow uneasy, thinking I was not interested. And if I began to discuss one of my stories, I too would soon stop short, knowing she was bored.

And though all this was unavoidable we could not help reproaching ourselves and feeling guilty, as if it was our own fault that our eyes were different and our tastes incompatible.

I, being the stronger, stood it better than she did, and sought and found in my mother-in-law what I had failed to discover in her daughter. But Gesa was different, although I did not notice it for a long while. For months I imagined she did not feel it as much as I did, and that her nature was more frivolous and resilient than mine. But one day I discovered my mistake.

We had just been in to the town, I forget what for—possibly to see an exhibition of Eilert's pictures—and having left the tram at Flottbeck on our way home, were drinking coffee at a riverside *café*, when a tragic accident occurred before our very eyes.

A storm had blown up during the afternoon, which was partly responsible for Gesa's wish to walk home from Flottbeck. We were watching a boat, which Gesa knew quite well, making its way along the river, when just as it reached a bend a sudden squall took the little craft by surprise, and it turned turtle. Gesa and I were the first to reach the bank and push a boat out to the rescue; but we soon saw that there was no sign of the crew on the surface of the water, and assumed that the waves were too strong or that the sails were preventing them from rising. At last, after half an hour of anxious waiting, the two bodies were recovered, but although the doctors tried artificial respiration for a long time their efforts proved vain, and we went back to our *café*, paid for what we had had, and walked home.

I was depressed and angry, and gave vent to my feelings by inveighing hotly against the frivolity, thoughtlessness, and undutifulness of the two young men who had been drowned, and expressing my sympathy for their relatives. And I repeated my warnings to Gesa, imploring her to think of my own and her parents' distress if ever she were the victim of such a mishap.

As she said nothing, I tried to peer into her face, and to my surprise found that her expression was quite blank. When I nudged her to make her attend to what I was saying she replied with a strange melancholy which I had not suspected in her: "Oh, it wouldn't matter so much as all that!" I protested violently, but she only said that she was good for nothing except sailing, and that life could not be all sailing. She added that she had not felt this until she lived with me, but now she was often quite hopeless.

I had always mastered my own melancholy by my religious faith, but I don't think I had ever discussed these deepest and most sacred things with her; for at first we had been too happy, like a pair of sea-gulls in the sun. But when I saw her distress I longed to help her, and I told her about the spiritual background to my life.

She listened for a while in silence; then she said she had long known that I believed in a God and other supernatural things, but that she couldn't. Even at school she had never felt any inclination to do so. She could not believe in anything she could not see with her eyes and hear with her ears. She knew it was all wrong, but she couldn't help it. Although she did not use these actual words, this was more or less what she meant, and in her voice there was just that suggestion of bitterness or mild anger which showed that she envied me and other people for being different from herself.

I was extremely depressed by her confession. I felt as though I had a pauper at my side whose misery my wealth could do nothing to relieve. At last, as I was utterly at a loss to know what to say, I spoke of her parents, of our love, and of my hope that she might have children, and then all would be well.

But she repeated that she did not want children. She saw no point in reproducing so imperfect a being as herself.

"You have married a sea-gull," she said. "Isn't there some fairy-tale about that? My mother always wanted to tell me fairy-tales when I was a child, but I could never listen to the end. I made paper boats instead. There's nothing of that kind in me!" And the blankness of her expression made her look almost half-witted.

I shuddered and was silent. I knew now that it was impossible for anyone to help her. God had bolted and barred all the entrances to her soul. I did not understand it at the time, but during the years of war, and particularly during those long hours on the snow-covered roads of Russia, everything gradually became clear to me.

Oh, I made many mistakes—nothing but mistakes, in fact. It was a mistake to take so much interest in other people and forget Gesa. It was a mistake to go to Stormfeld just then, and not persuade her to join me. At first she wanted to come. But when the day arrived the "boys" sent her a pressing invitation to go to Norderney, and I gave in. So she went off in her boat and I returned to our cottage.

As I stood alone in the silent room a wonderful feeling of serenity came over me. "Home!" I said softly. "I must go home!"

That was where my childhood had been spent! And a man's childhood stamps the whole of his life with an impress that lasts till he is ninety. There, at least, I could be myself and belong to myself!

. . . . .

I reached the house towards evening and peeped into the forge, which was already quite dark. Then I saw something move and recognized Engel Tiedje, peering out at me, his face twitching and the sooty fingers of both his hands buried in his hair.

"Don't you know me," I cried, "or aren't you pleased?"

As usual when he was embarrassed, his little blinking eyes wandered up and down the walls, and he tried to make a deep respectful bow, but failed.

Then I understood what was the matter! I had sent him one or two Press cuttings, in which my youthful rise to fame was discussed, and had been somewhat surprised that he had never written to me since. I now saw that he had taken the thing in the wrong way. So kissing him and twitting him with having gone off his head, I led him trembling at the knees to the bench and sat down. And thus we remained for some time, I stroking his hands while the tears ran down his face.

I gathered he was crying because he imagined I had drifted away from him, and was very much upset. For a long while we said little, though I continued to expostulate with him from time to time. At last I asked whether he would not like to have a pipe, and, standing up, he plunged his hand into his side pocket and lit his pipe with trembling hands. Then he called to Auntie Siene in the kitchen, and when her jolly round face appeared in the doorway he said with a grand gesture: "Otto is here . . . and just the same as ever!"

After he had washed himself and we had been all over the house we went for a long stroll together, first round the garden, and then across the dunes to the beach, recalling old times, greeting neighbours, and talking of my parents, Uhle Monk, and my own affairs.

When the two old people went to bed I retired to the sitting-room, in which my beloved parents' bed had been prepared for me. Opening the window, on the garden side of the house, I sat and listened to the murmur of the waves and the rustling of the trees in the churchyard, while my spirit wandered along every path, into every house, visiting all my friends. And wherever it went it found the ground firm beneath its feet.

Then followed weeks which might have been full of the purest beauty for me if only I had not been so young and had not made the mistake of being in too great a hurry. For hurry is always unbecoming and harmful.

They were weeks of wonderful fertility. For the first time since my childhood I found myself in a suitable environment, in my native country, with my whole day free to do as my spirit and my gifts prompted me. All the morning I would sit at my dear parents' table, sometimes starting before Engel had lighted the forge fire, and would write and write, slowly and painstakingly building up the characters in my new book till they stood out more vividly before my eyes than did their living prototypes.

And in the afternoons I would mix with my fellow-creatures; I would stand and talk with Engel and his assistant in the forge, surrounded by peasants, or with Auntie Siene, among the wallflowers and columbine in my mother's garden. I called on the young peasants and teachers who had been my playmates at school, and would wander with them and the young girls along the beach, or drive into the woods behind the first line of hills beyond the marshes. And everywhere, everywhere, I felt myself at one with them. I read their souls and their thoughts. I saw their hates and their loves, their cares and their plans, their joys and their sorrows. And I got to know the beautiful girls of the district better. They tried to court me.

Indeed, they never did anything else! It was second nature with them. They always tried to court any man who seemed the least bit desirable. And the fact that I had a young wife only made it all the more exciting. They flirted charmingly with me, and I did not mind. My whole being longed not for books, but for life! But I was a little intemperate, hasty, and over-anxious.

I often wandered about alone too, particularly when it was raining or very windy. And then, with the line of the horizon and the coast before me, pointing to eternity, I pondered on the meaning of life and the universe, and on my place and mission therein. Fearfully and with a beating heart I worshipped the unseen, and what I felt to be the eternal power behind phenomena. And through the unaided efforts of my soul I gradually became serene in my being, because my being reposed in God. Was this really so? Alas, no! I was still too young! But I was moving towards my goal, and my soul divined whither my path would lead, and became more resigned, calmer, and happier.

Every fortnight or so Gesa would sail down the Elbe to me with one or two of the "boys," and would warn me of her arrival by telephoning to our neighbour the innkeeper. And I would go to the dunes and look out over that vast expanse of water for the pathetic little sail I knew so well. It seemed fixed to one spot, so slowly did it move, and I would go back home, and on returning to the dunes would find that it had hardly stirred. Then suddenly it would seem to be coming quite close, and in a moment she would be standing by me, with her bright fair hair, her keen grey eyes, and her soft white limbs.

Three days of unspeakable bliss would follow. Bliss? Why, we were mad with joy! We could not leave each other. In the evening she would sit between Engel Tiedje and Auntie Siene and work at a new frock, and I don't know which of us three marvelled most at the length of her stitches. She would ask Engel questions about my childhood, and by sly attacks on my character provoke him most reluctantly to defend me. But we were united heart and soul, for it seemed as though Gesa—as the three of us secretly hoped—were going to stay.

Yet on the fourth day she would grow restless and begin to fuss about her boat. Casting her eyes across the waters, she would talk of nothing but the wind, the water, the birds, and the boats. Was it homesickness? Did she long for her kind mother and that kindred spirit her father? Or was it I? Did I perhaps make her feel, in some subtle, intangible way, that she was standing between me and my work? Was I perhaps no less possessed than she was? At all events, she would soon be sitting at the tiller, manipulating the ropes . . . the wind would catch her sails, and with one last look at me she would turn her face to the water and glide away. It drew her like a magnet . . . a power she could not resist.

One day I made a long excursion north along the heights of the old coast-line, and, feeling deeply stirred, passed many memorable spots associated with some of the most poignant episodes of my childhood—the hilly moor which I had crossed on my flight from Uncle Peter; the stone on which I had sat, tired out, when Balle had found me; the ditch along which I had waded with Bothilde on that summer night; and the old farmhouse with the window of the room in which I had so often sat up telling Bothilde and her friends stories of an evening. What a part that girl had played in my childhood! And was it not my memory of her that made me descend to the plain from the hills? I had heard from Balle that she was still held in the toils of her old love, and knowing her sterling qualities, and indignant that she should be bound to one so unworthy, I felt I must go to her and if possible help her.

At the entrance to the farm I happened to meet one of the old farm-hands, to whom I made myself known, and stopped talking to him for some time, asking him about the people of the house. He told me that Bothilde ran the place now, that her father, who was old, acted as herdsman, and that her mother was dragging out a half-crazy existence. The brother from America had proved a waster, but he lived at the farm as his sister's menial; while Dieter Blank, who still hung round making love to Bothilde, was quite hopeless.

As we stood talking by the fence who should come along but Bothilde herself, somewhat flushed with exercise, for she was bringing in some of the day's milk; and though at first she looked questioningly at me, when she recognized me her powerful features melted into a friendly smile and she invited me to lunch.

I noticed how much cleaner and brighter the rooms looked than they had done when her parents had control of the place, and as soon as we were alone in the parlour—the others were to have their meal in the kitchen—I told her how pleased I was to find her looking so strong and well. "Your whole personality breathes kindness and comfort," I said. "I felt that as a child." And I reminded her that she was in Eilert's picture.

"Yes," she replied without either pride or emotion, "he painted me at the shepherds' two years ago. I am a distant relative of theirs, and once a year I help Uhle to clean up their place." Uhle had told her I had written a book, and she marvelled at what her little farm boy had done.

We were interrupted by the familiar sound of the front door being opened, and as she turned pale and went trembling out of the room I gathered it was Dieter Blank. As she spoke to him about me I noticed that her voice had completely changed, and that she spoke in the humble, pleading, timid tone I knew so well.

Evidently anxious to prove that my visit meant nothing to him, he replied rudely that he too had friends waiting for him, and was going to Ballum with them, inviting her to join them.

She begged him piteously to stop at home, but I heard him answer impatiently something to the effect that he was "fed to the teeth" with her importunities; and then he went away.

I got up to catch a glimpse of him from the window as he left, and saw that he was the same as ever—a short, sturdy man, who seemed to move on springs. Fiery and headstrong, he was a complete contrast to her.

When she returned I took her to task for putting up with such treatment—she the proudest in the land! "Surely you can do better than that!" I exclaimed.

She declared there was no one else, and that I could not understand. But I knew that only another man could release her from her bondage.

At last, to my infinite joy and surprise, I managed to extract from her that there was somebody else, and that his name was Eilert Mumm. "But he has gone back to Holland," she added.

I pointed out that he was not the marrying sort, but she said she did not mind.

I protested that I could not understand how so supremely desirable a woman could have been so unsuccessful in love.

"Yes," she said faintly, "and they are both drunkards."

"I cannot understand!" I cried angrily. "Surely there are plenty of men after you! I can't believe there isn't one you could put up with—some good steady fellow who would offer you marriage and children. Heavens, how can you stand a rotter like that, who deliberately torments you!"

We were silent for a while, then presently she observed that it was not quite true to call him a rotter. Deep down there was good in him, but an evil spirit never let it come to the top. "Perhaps one day he will die," she whispered with a sigh. "He goes home drunk often enough."

"And you want him to die?" I asked.

"Yes," she said calmly. "I have been wanting it for years."

So she coveted peace through the death of her beloved! I laid a hand on hers. "Why, for two pins I'd lie in wait for him and strike him dead myself," I cried hotly.

"I have often thought of that," she said calmly as she slowly stroked the tablecloth; "but it's out of the question. I would have to do it openly and confess, and I don't want to go to prison. I should die if I could not get out into the fields and see things."

When I left she accompanied me as far as the road, and, shaking hands, thanked me for my visit and turned back.

I continued my walk northward, following the river bank when I reached it. Presently the towers of Ballum loomed up in the distance, while to my right lay the broad sunlit marshes.

In the afternoon, on nearing the sheep-farm, I noticed that the thatch had suffered a good deal from the storms we had had in the spring and that there were great holes in it. Finding one of the brothers sitting in a huge armchair in the hall, gazing drowsily out on the river, I chatted with him for a while, and asked him about the state of the roof. He replied briefly that his brother was dead, and that although the doctor said he had died of inflammation of the lungs he himself was convinced that it was the fear of having to do some thatching that had killed him. He seemed quite hopeless, and perfectly resigned to having the rain come through on the sheep, the fire, and his own bed.

I tried to comfort him, but it was no use. After a while he pointed with his thumb to a large wooden peg on the wall by the door. I got up, and taking down the rope hanging on it laid it on his knee. I thought he wanted to fetch one of the cows from the meadow. It never entered my head that he was too lazy to fetch a piece of rope to hang himself with! I asked him what he was looking at on the river, but not understanding his reply I left him and went into the kitchen, where I found Uhle.

Her hair was now quite white and her coppery cheeks stood out in sharp relief. Her wild little face shone with joy when she saw me, and we greeted each other cordially.

As she laid the table she told me in her calm simple way how the other shepherd had died—I gathered it was her husband. She also informed me that Eilert had been to the farm only a week before, and had slept in the large bed in the weaving-room. He had worked hard and painted for two whole days. She had invited Bothilde over during his stay, and seemed quite resigned to the fact that he was in love with the girl.

"But you still love him, don't you, Uhle?" I asked.

"Ah," she replied, slightly embarrassed, "that was in the old days, Twiddlums, when I was younger."

When I asked her where Eilert had gone she replied that he had returned to Rotterdam for a festival.

Sitting comfortably by the fire, we were discussing our other friends and acquaintances, when a peasant from a neighbouring farm rushed in and asked us where Jacob was.

I replied that I had left him sitting by the door in the hall.

"Yes," he replied, "but he's not there now. He went down to the meadow with a rope in his hand. I'm afraid something's happened!"

Uhle's knees gave way and she dropped on to the hearth.

"Impossible!" I cried, springing to my feet in horror. "How dreadful! Why, he was too lazy to fetch the rope himself! . . . Pull yourself together, Uhle! . . . Come along, my man, let's go and see."

We found him hanging at the spot the peasant had described, and thanks to the fresh breeze he was almost cold already. While we cut him down I had to give vent to my anger and astonishment.

The neighbour delivered a homily on the disease of indolence, but I was young and did not stop cursing even after he had gone off to fetch a ladder to carry the body on; and I was still raging when we got back to the kitchen.

Uhle, who had kept an eye on us and seen that our suspicions were confirmed, had prepared a couch for the dead man, and was busy poking the brushwood in the fire and making the sparks fly far into the room.

Clasping her gently to me, I did my best to comfort her, telling her that she had always been good to the two shepherds, and that, after all, it was high time the roof was rethatched. The indolence of the couple had passed all bounds.

"I made Engel Tiedje unhappy with my teasing and stoking, and now I have done the same with these two," she said with a bewildered look. "The best thing I can do is to set the whole place on fire, and then I can't do any more harm to anybody."

"What?" I cried, taking a burning log from the fire and brandishing it at her, "do you want to be more idiotic than him? No, the house belongs to you and Bothilde, and you must keep it. Eilert is sure to come back; and now the shepherds are gone he can live with you here."

"Yes," she replied, "he loves this old house, especially the big windows and doors and the oak." Then looking solemnly at me, as though she were not sure whether she was talking nonsense or not, she added: "He is a great man; but to me he is only a peasant's son."

I nodded. "His grandfather was a peasant," I replied.

"But if he came here," she rejoined, "they would have to have the house to themselves—Bothilde and him."

I started. "But he is so fond of you, Uhle," I replied.

"You are his whole youth to him. He will certainly want you. And he would not understand if you didn't stay."

"How could I bear it?" she cried.

I said I thought she could, because she loved him so much; but if she could not she was to come to me in Stormfeld, and I would repay her for all her generosity and kindness.

She pressed my arm, and I felt she was comforted.

I stopped till the following morning, when I crossed in the ferry with the peasant who was to fetch the coffin.

CHAPTER XXIV

A Small Sail on the Vast Ocean

ON reaching the opposite bank I found Auntie Lena waiting for the mayor and the judge, with whom she had business to transact. But when she saw me, instead of the two men she was looking for, she sank on to a tree trunk on the bank, and I could see that she was on the verge of getting the pip.

I told her I had been to see Uhle, and gave her an account of what had happened. She was deeply interested, and, commenting on the strangeness of the people along the North Sea coast, immediately described two similar cases that had occurred in Wenneby.

I then left her to her business, and went alone in the direction of the town. As I approached the house I saw Uncle Gosch coming towards me from the other side of the street. His trousers were stuffed into old-fashioned top-boots, all covered with dust, and he looked tired, as though he had walked a long way. It took him some time to remember me, but when at last he did so he looked very pleased, and, inviting me into the house, took me to his own room.

I told him all that had happened, and that I had met Auntie Lena, and then asked after Eva and Ernemann.

Seizing the button of my jacket, he leant back. "Everything is all right, my dear Diek!" he exclaimed, his kindly face beaming. "Think of it, Eva is going to be a nurse! That scientific man she was with has found her a post with a doctor in another town—a Dane. She writes very cheerful letters, and I'm certain she will make an excellent nurse!"

"Why, she will smother her patients up to the ears in cotton-wool," I said with a smile, remembering her attentions to me when I was a child.

He took my words as a compliment, and was obviously already picturing his daughter as a hospital nurse in a print uniform sitting by the bedside of the President of the United States, while I remarked somewhat anxiously that she had probably gone to another town only because her brother had been forced to move there to earn his living, and I asked how he was getting on.

"Just think!" he exclaimed, "he has changed his job! . . . He is now dealing in fruit from the South."

"Oh," I cried, "I think that will just suit him!" I wanted to please the old man.

"Exactly what I say!" he replied enthusiastically. "Don't you remember how he always had a longing for the South?"

I said I did remember, and he was delighted.

"And so, by dealing in melons and bananas," he added, "he will return to his old love, and become an explorer somewhere in Venezuela, or on the Amazon, I should imagine!"

I replied that I thought this highly probable, and we were both exceedingly enthusiastic.

He then quickly lapsed into his favourite theme, and told me of his great discovery. He had found the site of the old port on the North Sea which Pytheas had called Basileia!

Truth to tell, I was much more interested in the streamers on Eva's cap and in Ernemann's bananas than in Basileia; but to please him I looked astonished, and asked him where he had located it. He told me that Basileia was really Wesseln, a village close by. . . . Wasseli. . . . Weddelen. . . . Wesseln!

I told him I thought the etymology was probably sound, and his dear old face beamed with delight. It appeared, however, that Sven Modersohn had already written two articles contesting the discovery. But Uncle Gosch was busy writing a reply. Sven Modersohn had actually had the impudence to say in one of his articles that he was coming to investigate the matter for himself. But we should see!

Delighted with his youthful ardour and faith, I pressed his hand, reiterating my firm belief in the genuineness of his discovery.

In the middle of it all the front door bell rang, and I went out to see who it was.

A handsome young man in knickerbockers was standing on the doorstep, and, handing in his card, asked whether he could see Professor Bornholt.

It was Sven Modersohn!

Strange to say, Uncle Gosch was not only highly honoured, but also extremely pleased. "Where are you, dear old Modersohn?" he cried, as he ran out into the hall. "Come along, dear old friend. . . . Come inside, do!"

When he saw the young man he was beside himself with astonishment and joy. Embracing him, he exclaimed with tears in his eyes how wonderful it was that so young a man should have made such a profound and enthusiastic study of the history of the German people. Then, taking him into his room, he overwhelmed him with questions, while I went out to answer the door again.

This time it was Auntie Lena. She said she had heard our voices from outside, and, going straight to the kitchen and dropping wearily on a chair by the fire, added that she presumed we had told each other everything.

I informed her about Uncle Gosch's visitor, and said what a nice young man he was. She was not surprised, and immediately connected the visit with the discovery of Basileia.

I repeated my remark about Sven Modersohn, saying what a charming young man he was, and how pleased Uncle Gosch had been to see him; and after we had discussed the matter at length she told me all the Ballum news.

I had been burning with impatience for some time; at last, unable to stand it any longer, I exclaimed: "Don't you think you might talk about me for a bit now!"

"Oh, yes, of course," she drawled, "let us talk about you, certainly! . . . Yes! How is Gesa? Still cheerful? And are you as much in love as ever?"

I said we were.

"I suppose she still goes sailing a lot?" she observed.

I admitted it, but explained that it did not interfere with our mode of life. And this was perfectly true—at least, so I believed at the time.

Then she returned to the people of Ballum, and I took her to task for not wanting to discuss the subject most important to herself and me and all of us.

"Oh," she replied carelessly, "you mean your book?" She agreed that it was very fine, and its success most satisfactory. "But," she added, "I really can't see why it's so important."

I upbraided her for not telling the truth. "The two leading lights of the place should be straight with each other!" I cried.

I could see the malice sparkling in her eyes.

"Yes," she rejoined, "probably I am the leading lady. But what about the men? Surely Uncle Gosch with his research about Pytheas and this Basileia business is ten times more important than you! What's all this fuss about your book? All you have done is to twist about the stories you have heard Engel Tiedje and the peasants tell in the forge, and add some of your own fibs! That's all! Any village schoolmaster could have done that—not to mention the parsons!"

"All right then," I replied indignantly, "just you sit down and try. Title: *The Parsonage of Wenneby*. . . . Could you do it? . . . You couldn't! It would be a nice hotch-potch! Nobody would print the stuff. But my book is in its thirtieth thousand! Do you hear? Thirty thousand! That means at least a hundred thousand readers!"

Looking contemptuously at me, she hinted that I had probably been deceived, and that paper was long-suffering. "I am certain," she declared, "that nobody in Wenneby has ever heard about it."

After visiting Basileia with the two scholars on the following morning, I took leave of Auntie Lena and Uncle Gosch, and towards evening went over to the ferry. I wanted to spend the night at the sheep-farm and keep Uhle company in her watch over her dead brother-in-law.

On the ferry I happened to fall in with a herd of oxen and Balle Bohnsack, to whom the beasts apparently belonged; at any rate, he had them in his charge.

As usual he had his top-boots on, but his linen jacket was clean, and his yellow locks noticeably shorter. He was addressing his oxen in extremely grandfatherly tones, and although there was nothing objectionable in that I could not help thinking that when he greeted me he did not draw sufficient distinction between the animals and myself. He did not seem to be aware that I was a celebrity, but asked me whether I was still an "ink-slinger."

When I felt the time had come to tell him I had written a book, he asked me with his old familiar wink whether I would undertake to guess which of his oxen was the most good-natured; and on my declining he said he would bet a sheep that no one in his senses would ever read my book.

He asked me another question, but I had done with him and told him I had no wish to disturb the harmony of his relations with his cattle any longer. Then, elbowing my way through them, I went over to ferryman Busch.

He informed me, in tones which he imagined were gentle, that Balle and Dina were getting on splendidly, that Dina, who was at her mother's for the day, was expecting her second child, and that his own wife was also expecting another addition to the family. "The eleventh," he added, "and it looks as though he'll be a fine sturdy lad."

Helmut was still at the co-operative stores, but dressed quite decently all the same. The old man seemed to have taken it for granted that his son went about Hamburg with a red sash round his waist.

When we landed I accompanied Balle and Busch to the ferry-house to greet Dina and her mother, and soon picked out Dina's little boy when I saw his yellow hair, his jerky eyebrows, and the wooden calves in his fat fists. Balle seemed to be a very important member of his father-in-law's household. Sitting in the armchair with half a dozen youngsters crawling all over him, he talked to us all in his usual grandfatherly tones. But old Busch did not seem to mind—in fact, he and his wife appeared rather to like it!

I stayed with them half an hour, hoping I might see Helmut, who was expected; but when he did not turn up I left and walked along the bank towards the sheep-farm.

It was getting dark, and as I went along I thought I saw Helmut come out from a break in the willows a little way in front of me. And when I reached the opening I saw a boat waiting on the edge of the bank, and recognized the girl in it as Barbara Mumm.

Thinking she had just come from the opposite bank, I paid no particular attention to the boat, which I should otherwise have recognized, and even forgot the man who had passed in front of me a moment before, so completely was I absorbed by this fresh apparition, who, in addition to being a relative of mine, was an exceedingly pretty girl. She was dressed in a becoming woollen jumper, of a fine green colour, and her intelligent little face beneath its dark ringlets was full of life.

She invited me to get into the boat, saying she would row me as far as the sheep-farm; and as I got in I took her hand. "There's something adventurous in your eyes and your whole manner to-day," I observed.

She smiled and admitted that at times she did feel like that, particularly when she had no companion and was looking for one.

I told her how delighted I should be if only she could find the right man. But she reminded me that she was very particular. For the right man would not only have to suit her as a mate, but would also have to be comfortably off, and that made things difficult.

"Meanwhile," I rejoined, "you enjoy life by playing first with one and then the other!"

"Yes," she agreed, "but prudently."

I ventured to question whether she were always so very prudent. "What has that to do with you?" she retorted.

I explained that, being an author, I was always eager for copy. I then proceeded to enumerate her past admirers in chronological order; but when I came to Dutti Kohl she protested that the attachment was entirely on his side.

I was delighted, and asked her how matters stood with Helmut.

Looking scornfully at me, she upbraided me for teasing her about him as her brother had always done, and said there was nothing between them. At that moment I happened to notice that the boat belonged to ferryman Busch, and remembered the man who had crossed my path on the bank. "But you've only just this minute crossed the river with him!" I exclaimed, astounded at her hypocrisy.

She smiled and admitted it. "He was on the other side with his boat, and I spoke to him. He looks very fine, particularly when he sits in front of one, rowing."

"Yes, he is a well-set-up young fellow," I replied with a twinge of jealousy. "He has fine straight limbs."

She nodded. "Yes, it is very nice to sit opposite him," she said. "I could see that he would like to go further with me, but did not dare. He respects me too much, because his parents are poor."

I suggested the real reason was that he had a sense of honour, and thought that she had too.

"And don't you think I have?" she retorted, scrutinizing me closely.

"No," I answered. "As soon as you get into firm hands you'll be a jewel; but until then you will remain an adventurous, unreliable creature."

She was evidently pleased at my frankness, and, growing more confidential, she related her experiences with a sort of grave and courageous defiance. For the first time in my life I began to feel at ease in her company.

We stayed together until midnight, when she put me ashore, saying it had been a memorable day for her, a day that would give her enough to think about for at least three more.

Again I referred to Helmut. She shrugged her lissom shoulders, and declared she had no feeling for him at present. Then turning back to her boat she rowed towards Ballum.

I had intended spending the night with Uhle, but youth and dalliance made me change my plan; so I decided to go straight home.

I walked all night along the dyke, and dawn was just breaking when I reached the dilapidated old mill under whose shadow I had as a terrified and trembling child spent one of the most dreadful nights of my life.

. . . . .

I sat down on one of the massive beams which supported it, and, gazing across the landscape, thought with wonder and gratitude of all the good spirits who had helped me on my way, of the serenity and cheerfulness that had been mine of late, and of the decisive part which the atmosphere of my home had played in effecting this happy consummation.

For the man of parts—and why should I not apply this description to myself?—are not gifted human beings common enough? Think of the hidden genius in hundreds of humble workers, gardeners, dressmakers, milliners, and so forth!—the man of parts does not need to have the whole world or even high society at his beck and call in order to reach complete efflorescence, though he certainly requires a perfect microcosm, a sort of miniature world complete in itself, in which the whole range of humanity is represented—poor and rich, subjects and rulers, worldly and spiritual people, townsmen and country folk, and so forth. And such, more or less, was my native village.

And so when summer came I was still at Stormfeld, immersed and happy in my work and wholly engrossed by it. I might rejoice in my heart when I thought of Gesa, or expected a visit from her; but my soul's life, in season and out of season, was my work and nothing else. And in confessing this I acknowledge that I was not a good citizen or husband. I was an artist, and that was the main cause of our misfortune.

I cannot remember much about her last visit, but she must, as usual, have told me all about her adventures—chiefly sailing. Her whole life seemed to be spent in her boat, and I imagined that she had her meals in it, entertained her friends in it, and then, wrapping herself in a sail, even slept in it.

When she had finished all she had to say, I probably began my tale, and told her all about my work; how I was getting on with my new novel, what I had talked about on my walks with old and new friends, and what I thought about them, entering with great enthusiasm into the minutest detail. But the longer I talked the more bored did she become. These things did not interest her. What did she care about them? I never said a word about tackle, wind, or tiller; I never mentioned sea-gulls, sails, or tar; but spoke only of anger, love, pride, faith, hatred, kindness, youth, and so on. What were these things to her? So, after I had talked for some time—I see it all now—she would walk silent and crestfallen at my elbow, surreptitiously casting longing eyes across the water at our side; and that bright rippling surface, stretching to the horizon, together with every sail and every bird upon it, was nearer to her than I was.

I was not entirely free from blame. Instead of devoting three days once a fortnight to her, I ought, even at the cost of being hard on her, to have forced her to live with me, and given up at least four hours a day to her company. I was also wrong to be on terms of such cordial friendship with the young people about me, particularly the girls. Indeed, at times I even forgot I was married; or, rather, the married state was not precisely my strong point! Nor should I have been so careless about money matters. She and I were alike in this. True, my bank-book was not quite as badly kept as my father-in-law's, but it only balanced for short periods at a time. In fact, although I was twenty-five I was still somewhat unsteady and unreliable. I ought to have seen where the danger lay. But I was so confident about my shrewdness of vision. I felt I was so wise in my summing up of Eilert Mumm! I ought to have paid more attention to the material side of life, and been less absorbed in the creatures of my imagination, the characters in my novels.

On the Sunday morning of her last visit I tried to persuade her to go to church with me, but she refused, saying she was frightened of churches—particularly our village church, because I had told her there were graves under the aisles and nave.

I remember too that we had discussed Paul Sooth's marriage. He and his wife were so different, and yet got on so well together. How was that? I tried to explain the anomaly. But I saw that I had gone beyond her depth again, and that she had grown silent and wistful. At last she spoke of Barbara Mumm, and said she thought the girl would have made me a good wife.

I laughed and shook my head; but after a moment's consideration admitted that I might have got on with her quite well, particularly as she was a frank, outspoken creature.

When we were alone together on that last evening I remember that she was her old lively self again. Sitting on the edge of the bed, with her shapely legs stretched before her, she was putting safety-pins and her usual long stitches into a split seam she was trying to mend, making fun of herself, and threatening to come to me next time in a dress entirely held together with pins. Then she sprang to her feet and danced to me, turning her pretty little head about, and ogling me in the most fascinating way. And that is how I remember her—lithe, slim, playful, and wanton. She told me how much she loved the life she was leading, free and alone, with three days in every fortnight spent with me. She laughed; but I believe I saw melancholy lurking in her eyes, as is so often the case with laughing people.

On the following morning she again set sail and left me.

About a fortnight later, just as I was expecting her to come again, a boat arrived, with three of her "boys," who informed me that she was going to leave Övelgönne that evening with a fellow called Timm Thaden, who was known to be a daring yachtsman as well as a heavy drinker.

I don't know where or how the disaster happened. No, I know nothing about it!

It is possible that, unable any longer to endure our life together, with its harmony only on the physical side, and at a loss to discover any other solution, she may in a moment of despair have engineered the calamity while her companion slept. It is also quite possible that it was simply an ordinary accident—a sudden squall, a piece of wreckage which struck them in the night, or what not. And at the very moment the thing happened spirits may have been hovering round who helped to consummate the disaster—I don't know! What, in fact, do we know of life and death? We believe, but can we be sure, that our neighbour is a human being?

For the last three days the weather had been rough and windy, but not in the least stormy. As, however, it had grown squally in the last twenty-four hours, I telephoned to her to beg her to wait until the next day, and not to set out even then unless the weather had improved.

But she was one of those creatures who could never be persuaded to change a plan. Nothing can make such people understand that an elemental force is moving towards them, to crush both themselves and the house they are in.

I heard her laugh on the telephone. She said it was precisely because it was squally that she wanted to start that very night. It would be heavenly! And then she asked me whether I was not looking forward to having her with me in the morning. She would arrive early enough for us to have a whole hour alone together. And she spoke in that soft, gentle voice which she always used when I folded her in my arms.

I woke several times in the night, and, listening to the wind, was relieved to find that although the weather was still squally it was no rougher. Towards morning, however, it grew more boisterous. I dressed and went through the forge. I wanted to go to the beach and have a look out. Engel Tiedje offered me glasses, but I declined them. He came with me. As we reached the church we were greeted by a fresh gust, and took shelter against its walls. It was a violent gust, blowing sand, grass, and leaves over the roof of the church.

Then we went on to the dunes and gazed out to sea. It looked dreadfully bleak and wild. To our left the sun was shedding a watery light through dark, heavy clouds. The "boys" had joined us, and we stood there fully two hours, talking, doubting, guessing, and scanning the horizon as far as we could see. From time to time one of the "boys" would go to the post office to find out whether there was any news.

When at twelve o'clock there was no sign of Gesa and no news from her I telephoned to Övelgönne to find out whether she had left, and when I heard that she had I went straight to the station and took the first train thither.

I found her parents at home, and her father, pale and silent, pacing to and fro in the sitting-room. He had telephoned to the pilot stations and small ports along the coast, but had obtained no news. He knew there was little hope. But my mother-in-law, who was sitting at the window with her work, tried to comfort us. She convinced herself by her own arguments, and I gathered that the ship which she felt sure had picked up Gesa was an Oriental liner, and that the trip would give Gesa an opportunity of visiting her uncle, and possibly bringing him back with her, when everything, including the bank-book, would be set in order.

As we sat in that mean, shabby room, with the shadows falling about us, the telephone bell suddenly began to ring very persistently, and I remembered that it was the time when Gesa usually fixed her appointments and settled her trips with the "boys." They were all calls concerning "wonderful cruises," invitations to boating club meetings, and suggestions for fresh trips.

And instead of Gesa it was I who sat and answered: "Gesa left for Stormfeld yesterday morning and there has been no news of her anywhere along the coast."

"Oh, dear! . . . Oh! . . . Oh, dear!"

But I could not bear it any longer. I imagined she was calling me, and asking me to go north and scour the sea for her. So I returned to Stormfeld, and went out on the dunes again, standing there for hours, looking across the vast cheerless waste of waters to the far horizon. . . . But there was no sign of her!

Exhausted by the constant standing and walking, I returned home, snatched a few minutes' sleep on a chair, and then got up and went back to the beach.

Dusk fell again slowly over the sea. It was still squally, and the waves on the horizon were like white hillocks. Occasionally a bright light stood out like a sail. But in a moment the effect changed, and I saw that it had been only a trick of the waves. . . . There was no sign of Gesa!

By now I could hardly stand, and with bent knees I crawled home, threw myself on my bed, and slept. But it was only for a moment; I was soon up again and back on the beach, where I stood in the night wind, with Engel Tiedje at my side, straining our eyes over the restless sea. Day dawned and again we telephoned to Övelgönne, Cuxhaven, and the small ports along the coast. But nothing had been heard of Gesa's boat!

It was now certain that she had been drowned.

We offered a reward for the recovery of the two bodies; we telephoned along the coast, and studied the local papers. Everybody helped. For was not vom Gang well known all along the coast? But there was no news of Gesa!

Going from the beach to the dunes, and then to the dyke, I wandered backward and forward, staring hopelessly across the endless grey waste of waters. Somewhere, over there, in the wind and beneath that glittering surface, she must be lying with her little white sail and those eyes that used to look so shyly into mine. I half hoped that the little white sail was wrapped about her, about those tender limbs which had been my joy. The sea roared, the birds screeched above their nests in the scrub, and the wind rose again. The rain beat against my face; I could not see twenty yards before me; I knew that she would never come back! But I still looked out to sea!

Once more I went to Övelgönne, and sat with her poor parents and mingled my tears with theirs. Then, begging them not to be angry with me for returning north, I left for Stormfeld. I felt I must go back to the beach. It was as though she expected and wanted me to be there, looking out across the sea, searching the horizon, believing she would return.

And so I stood on the beach once more, listening to the breakers at my feet, wondering whether they knew anything about her, and scanning the face of the waters to see whether the waves ever laughed faintly as I used to laugh when I sported with my Gesa.

Then suddenly a mad and quite incredible rumour reached my ears. There was going to be war! What nonsense! What about? War at this time of day? Had not aeroplanes and airships just been invented? Were they not going to obliterate frontiers and national boundaries? Why, surely we were on the eve of the United States of Europe! Had I not been a journalist and written many articles in this vein? War? Nonsense! And I assured Engel Tiedje, the fisherfolk, and the peasants that the rumours were quite senseless, and went back to my vigil on the beach.

Then a friend arrived from Sweden. He had just been to Africa, Australia, and Japan, and he came and found me on the beach. "You don't know," he said, "how much Germany is hated all over the world!" "That's only England's envy and lies!" I retorted. "A Siberian army corps is marching west, with bag and baggage," he continued. . . . But I did not hear what he said. I did not want to hear. Was I not an intelligent being

—a very intelligent being? I regarded all idea of war as ridiculous.

But at the end of the fourth week . . . war! . . . Who would go to the help of the Fatherland, which was encompassed by enemies on every side? I went like everybody else.

Thus I found myself in barracks in Altona.

More sensitive than other men, my brain was racked with thoughts about the rights and wrongs of humanity, and my duty to God and man. I saw the Saviour standing before me, gazing into my eyes. I did not see Him as a God—that I had never done—but as a pure and beautiful man, the most beautiful of men. I am not a creature of compromise or make-believe. I must be clear. At last I said to Him: "I believe in Thy being and Thy works. I know Thou art right. But although I believe in Thee I am also a man of my day. Despite Thy holy works, I must strike down my fellows who would rob me of my goods and my honour. Unto Thee the future and a holy generation of men; but unto me and my fellows the savage deed, the heavy conscience, and the thorn in the spirit!" All this went through my mind as I lay sleepless on my palliasse in the barracks.

But most of the time I stood in spirit on the beach gazing out to sea. The wind came in heavy gusts across the waste, the breakers roared on the beach, and the birds screamed above the waving sand-grass. Yonder were clouds of vapour, and an occasional little white sail on the infinite undulating surface. But she did not come!

We worked hard, learning how to kill men. Many, many hundreds of thousands had already been killed. The Major told us we must make haste and be ready to fill the gaps. And we did indeed make haste. It struck me that we were not being taught our job very thoroughly. During one of our practice hours the first snow fell.

Then the day came for us to march off. Hundreds watched us march past, waving to us and weeping. But there was no one there for me, and I looked neither to right nor left, but straight out to sea, through the veil of falling snow. There she is! . . . There . . . somewhere there! She has become one with our passion and desire! The wind blew . . . it was Gesa! The sea roared . . . it was Gesa! The breakers churned up the foam . . . that was Gesa's dear bosom. . . . But she herself was never found, and would never come back.

The train took us east.

CHAPTER XXV

No Warrior and yet at War

FROM Altona we travelled *via* Berlin for about forty-eight hours in an easterly direction. After leaving the train we spent our first day doing route-marching practice through wooded roads in full kit—heavy top-boots reaching half-way up the leg into which we tucked our trousers, a greatcoat falling below our knees, a hundred and twenty cartridges in our belts, a haversack and a water-bottle, an iron ration of three pounds in our knapsacks, two horse-blankets, a spade, and a rifle—sixty pounds altogether. The company consisted of two hundred and fifty men, all young or fairly young, the sons of Holstein farmers, labourers, and factory workers. Seventy-five of them had already been on the Western Front and seen war; the rest of us were campaigning for the first time. Although our mood was grave we were full of hope and confidence, for we were all convinced that Germany was right and that the war was a bitter necessity. Wherever the snow had blown away the road was extremely rough, and in many places like glass; whilst wherever it had met with any obstacle there were drifts into which we sank up to our knees. We were exhausted when we returned from this march. On the following morning we moved eastward.

I was young and had not yet seen very much of the world. I was also inquisitive. In spirit I had searched many a soul that had faced the fire of battle. Now I was to face it myself, and I was stirred to the depths of my being. We passed through a village which, compared with one of our Holstein villages, seemed very poor, with its small wooden houses and their miserable and scanty furniture. The Russians had already been there and done a great deal of damage. The people were very glad to see us, and, retiring to their kitchens, gave up their sitting-rooms to us. Some of them came to meet us and informed us that the Russians were retreating. We were also met by soldiers and Landsturm men. "Thank God, you have come!" they said. "We can't deal with them by ourselves. There are too many of them!" Then we marched in the direction of a wood on the crest of a hill in front of us, which was said to be held by Russians. It was beginning to get dark.

When we were about a mile and a half away from the wood we had to deploy and advance in a long thin line. It was here that we received our baptism of fire. We were told to lie down and shoot, but not to overdo it, so as to avoid wasting our ammunition. From time to time our N.C.O. ordered our group to stand up, advance a few paces, and then drop to the ground again; and thus we gradually drew nearer and nearer. But for our corporal, our group, which consisted of nine men, had never seen a shot fired. We were short of breath and were shaking with terror and excitement. I imagine we were all in the same state. We knew we were on the verge of killing and being killed. We did not even notice the icy cold wind which was blowing gently but bitingly across the bare fields. And thus we lay amid the disagreeable sharp smell of powder and blue smoke, blurting out short staccato sentences in the intervals of firing. . . . "Have you got the range? . . . Here's a little cover! . . . If only we could get to that wall!" . . . No thought of our homes or of God! Only once did I have a sort of numbed feeling, "Now you are in battle and shooting your fellow-men!" Otherwise all I was conscious of was my own little shred of life and the five or six yards left and right of me . . . and the silent excitement all round and the noise.

When we had advanced about three hundred yards the order went round, "Fix bayonets!" This unnerved us. We imagined ourselves transfixing a man! But when the Russians heard the signal to charge, with which they must have been familiar, they leapt out of their holes and rushed helter-skelter through the wood. When we reached their position, which consisted of innumerable hollows dug in the ground, we found dead men sitting in some, wounded in others, and among them some who had not been touched. The latter threw up their arms and looked at us in terror. But when we signed to them that we meant them no harm, and addressed them cheerfully with smiles on our faces—for we were unspeakably relieved to have got through the affair so easily—they laughed and marched to our rear, and I believe many of us envied them their good fortune.

Then we continued our advance through the wood, over the uneven snow-covered paths, with an icy wind blowing in our faces, and marched the whole of that night and the following day. The icy blast never dropped, and we were often obliged to wade through snowdrifts up to our waists. From time to time, at intervals of about three hours, we piled arms, laid our knapsacks down, sat on them, and, supporting our heads in our hands, immediately fell asleep. Once when I looked up and found a blizzard blowing over us I thought we must certainly all freeze to death as we sat there. In the evening we reached the little town of Bialla, which had been heavily shelled. It was full of troops of all kinds—infantry, cavalry, and artillery—but I don't remember what the regiments were. We slept on the floor of a room which was full of icy draughts. Towards midday we had to move on.

We were marching along the road in fours, when suddenly the Russians dropped shrapnel on us from a wood. Our artillery immediately retaliated, firing over our heads. We were extremely agitated and grave, for it was the first time we had experienced this, and, looking up at every shell that burst in the air, we ducked our heads. When the firing became heavier we had to deploy and lie down in the snow. As we lay there with nothing to do we were overcome with unutterable exhaustion, and many of us fell asleep. Not a few woke up to find they could no longer feel their feet. One man's feet were so badly frostbitten that he had to be taken to the rear. Many others had fallen out during that three days' march, either from exhaustion, sore feet, or dysentery, and we were now reduced to about a hundred and eighty men.

Evening fell and then night, and we were still lying under fire. It was pitch-dark, for we had not even any light balls. At dawn when one of us stood up and tried to stamp life into his frozen feet he was shot in the thigh, and had to crawl back on his hands and knees. When it was light the Russians evacuated their position, and we got up and advanced. As we made a circuit in order to avoid a snowdrift, we saw the first of our dead, lying in the snow. We all looked quite calmly into his face. He was lying on his back, with his rifle across him; his eyes were closed, on one side of his head there was blood, and close by the snow was also dyed red.

The whole of that day, I think it was the eleventh of the month, we continued our march. It was not quite so cold, and the wind was no longer so cutting; but marching through the snow with our heavy kit was terribly tiring. Moreover, the field kitchens had not been able to keep up with us, and we had nothing to eat. So we were allowed to consume half our iron rations, though this did not appease our ravenous hunger. Towards evening we passed through a large village that had been heavily shelled (I believe it was called Neudorf), and entered a large straggling wood. As we were marching on—all five companies of the battalion—we suddenly heard that there were Russians in front and behind us. So we halted and peered through the shelled trees into the night. When our officers, who had held a consultation, returned it was decided to make a simultaneous charge in all four directions, and forming square we dashed with a wild cheer into the darkness. The manœuvre was successful. The Russians retreated. We had cleared the road and wanted to move on. But suddenly it was discovered that the fifth company was missing. We were forced to conclude that it had been surrounded and captured, and we returned without it to Neudorf, from which place we had originally advanced. When day dawned, however, the lost company turned up.

We remained for the rest of the night and the following morning in Neudorf. As the field kitchens were not very well supplied—the meat was generally tough and had no goodness in it—we cooked ourselves potatoes, which we found in the half-ruined cottages, and ate them with salt. How delicious they were!

When I had finished my meal I happened, on turning the corner of the street, to knock up against Paul Sooth, who was with another battalion, and I asked him for all the news. I heard that Balle Bohnsack was with his regiment, but in another village. He had also heard a rumour that Eilert Mumm was in Finland, or somewhere in that direction, where he had been paying a visit, and that he had been taken prisoner and interned in Russia. He told me various other pieces of news about common acquaintances, all very distressing. He spoke very coldly —I believe because he was terrified—and struck me as being strange and absent-minded. But I suppose I was strange too, and that he thought I was a ghost.

In the afternoon, when we were about to march on and were lined up in the street, our General arrived on a small brown horse. He was a broad-shouldered man with a pointed beard; in the sharp, staccato accents of the Prussian officer, though in a pleasant enough voice, he addressed a few words to us, telling us that during the last five days we had been taking part in a great battle, and explaining that we were on the southern or right wing of the Front, our friends in the north, from Gumbinnen downwards, constituting the other arm of the pincers. He congratulated us on what we had already achieved, described the plan of campaign, and exhorted us to advance with confidence, as the Russians were a beaten horde. When he had ridden off our Captain informed us that, although the General had spoken so cheerfully, he himself was not at all convinced that the outlook was so bright. The Captain had not been very popular with us in the training camp; he had been too ready with arrests and refusals of leave. But since he had been in the field with us he had been nothing but a soldier of greater experience than ourselves, and we were always glad to hear what he had to say.

The whole of the rest of the day we continued our march. A thaw had now set in, and the roads were soft. By this time there were a great many more of us, and the roads were bristling with troops on the march. As numbers of motors bearing Staff and Intelligence officers were constantly passing ahead of us, we gathered that we should not reach the Front that day. At dusk we were told that we should be billeted on an estate lying alongside the road. We were delighted to hear that we were going to spend a night under cover, and in high spirits we tramped up to our knees in mud, dead tired though we were, in the direction of the property. But at midnight when we reached the farm-houses we found them packed to the attics with troops; and we were obliged to return to the road. By this time we were at our last gasp, and laying our knapsacks down and wrapping ourselves in our coats and blankets in the horrible filth we fell asleep. We got up the next morning covered from head to foot with mud and started off without having had anything to eat or drink. Nevertheless, we were in quite good spirits, though we could not help thinking that superhuman efforts had now been required of us for a whole week, and that it was a mistake, for we were almost bound to break down if it came to hard fighting.

That day—or was it the following day?—we crossed the frontier. The Captain spoke a few encouraging words to us, and for the first and only time since we had been on the move we sang as we marched along. I remember that as I looked at the Captain my eyes stung painfully as if they were burnt, and seemed to be sunk in deep hollows in my head. The frontier ran right through the middle of the village, and we could tell which was the Russian side from the inferior and dirty appearance of the cottages. We marched the whole of that day and half the night. We were told each day that we were expected to march to such and such a point; but as soon as we reached it were informed that our destination lay a few miles farther on. By this means they hoped to encourage us and keep us going. I suppose the method was justified.

The following day at midday we were billeted on a manor farm consisting of a number of low buildings teeming with troops, and we spent the rest of the day and night eating, drinking, and sleeping. That night I was put on sentry duty near the kitchen, and had an opportunity of telling the cook that I was the son of a blacksmith and had written a book. The fact that I had written a book did not impress him; but, as it happened that he also had come from a forge, he gave me some coffee and meat.

The following morning we continued our march until at midday we again came into touch with the Russians. As we could not make any proper progress, we dug ourselves in. The earth was sandy, but not sandy enough to crumble. The country was hilly and slightly wooded. We were sparing of our ammunition, and the artillery fired over our heads. Late in the evening the Russians retired, and we were able to occupy a village possessing a spring, the water of which was drawn up by a large crab-bar, like those used on old farms in Holstein. We were quick to make for this spring. But as the great crab-bar soared above the roofs of the cottages it was soon shot to bits, and we had to give up trying to use it. We remained three days in this neighbourhood, but I remember very little about it, except that we had to do several hard marches in the district and that the food was good. Even those of us who were intellectually alert had no thought in our heads beyond eating and sleeping, for we felt that food and sleep alone could ward off the deadly exhaustion which was creeping over our weary bodies. During the whole of this period I was unable to be any more to my fellow-soldiers than they were to me—a good comrade.

When, on the march, my thoughts wandered away from the things that were under my nose, and my imagination started a flight on weary wings, it always went home to my nearest and dearest. How clearly I saw Stormfeld and Ballum and all my old friends! How hard I tried to picture what they were all doing at that hour, and what they felt like! With what love and tenderness those two old people in Ballum must have been thinking of me, and with what anxious and bewildered feelings must Engel Tiedje have been filled as he thrust his tongs into the white heat of the furnace! . . . Was Fritz Hellebeck in the firing line? What a good thing it would be if he were killed! . . . Where was Eilert? Was he in Russia or had he escaped? . . . Was Balle Bohnsack still alive? A lucky chap, the captain who had him in his company! . . . Gesa? Oh, dead, dead! . . . Her poor parents! . . . War had fallen like a thunderbolt on every house, and everybody was looking for his own among the smoking ruins. . . . Where were my own? In dust, smoke, and fire! I could not see them. . . . Sleep was overcoming me. A fellow-soldier behind was grumbling . . . "I say, Babendiek, are you thinking out a new fairy-tale? Don't dream so much!"

On the fourth day we continued our march and reached a village which the Russians had evacuated voluntarily. We searched the cottages and found many of the enemy concealed in them, and collected them together. In the evening we continued our way by the light of the moon and came upon a road through a wood. It was freezing again, but there was no snow about.

When we reached the end of the wood we were told to unload—which many of us did not do, by the by—and to fix bayonets and deploy to the left. Soon we came to some ploughed fields, and although we advanced as quietly as possible we could not help the clink of a spade or a rifle being heard. Then suddenly we found we were being heavily fired upon from a distance of not more than forty yards. If we had charged at once things might have been all right. But, throwing ourselves on the ground, we tried to dig ourselves in as we lay. There were about twenty of us without any officer, and we heard later that we had gone too far to the left and lost touch with our company. When the firing died down a bit we crept back on our hands and knees; then, springing to our feet, made a bolt for the village. There we found many of our men wounded—that is to say, those who had been able to get away. We asked where our company was, but nobody could tell us. Dawn was just breaking.

We were standing about, talking to the wounded, when a short, fat major came along the road and said: "You must go back to the front line." When we explained that we had lost our company he told us where it was, and ordered us to follow him. We went with him and crept crouching along a strip of wood. He then pointed out our comrades—they were at a point about thirty yards ahead of us to the left—and told us to make a rush for them, leading us himself. But just as he reached the trench held by our men he got a bullet in the throat. He tried to loosen his belt, but fell sideways into the arms of our comrades. One by one we jumped after him into the trench. Many of our men had already been wounded and a few who had been hit in the head had collapsed motionless on to the ground.

We lay enveloped in a smarting blue cloud of smoke and, filled with terror and excitement, kept up a lively fire in the midst of the terrific din around us. We stumbled and crept about, stepping over the dead and wounded, and raising ourselves cautiously, fired, shouting to each other: "Have you got the range?" . . . We dodged shell splinters and whistling bullets. "Damn it, that was a close shave! . . . How long is this going on? . . . Are you wounded? . . ." Medical orderlies and stretcher-bearers came along the trench. . . . "Out of the way! Make way!" We were short of ammunition and took it from the wounded. The Russians, barely thirty yards away, were in much greater strength and were firing much more fiercely than we were. We saw and heard nothing of our officers, but, as far as I could make out, every one did his duty, firing as often as he could; and every shot was fired at the risk of death, for we had to put our heads above the parapet to shoot. When we had been there a few hours, I cannot tell how long, we saw that the Russians were trying to envelop us on our left flank, so we abandoned our dead and wounded and ran like hares out of the trench, and back across the open fields, and I and a few others reached a wood.

Under cover of the wood we stood and knelt where we could, utterly bewildered and crestfallen, not knowing what to do. Two of us, quite young fellows, who had seen their dearest friends fall beside them, were crying and screaming like madmen. The captain, who had also reached the wood, was standing there pale, his lips compressed and his eyes sad as death. Three times he asked: "Where is the eighth company?" "We are the eighth company," we replied. When he looked at us and found that we were only thirty men all told he shook his head in silent anguish. For the rest of the day we remained in the wood in a state of complete despair. Towards evening the company sergeant-major called the roll and announced that only thirty of our company were left, and only about two hundred of the whole battalion.

I think we must have stayed two days in this sparse wood and in the village close by. I remember that the cottages were packed with troops, and that we slept in a little room with a red tiled floor where there was a big kitchener, which some of the men used as a bed. We were extremely miserable, and stood or sat together discussing the disaster in plain, simple words, mentioning the names of the dead and wounded, asking after one man or another, whose fate we did not know, and commiserating his relatives. On the third or fourth day we moved on.

We now found ourselves surrounded by masses of troops who were pushing forward. The country was still wooded though sparsely. The food had improved. When our supplies ran short we were sometimes given food by the Field Artillery, who were better fed than we were. We came across numbers of abandoned rifles and batteries, and endless rows of wagons, and once from a height on the road we saw in the distance a great crowd of men standing along the paths through the woods, as though they had been herded together, and all round them thousands of others running hither and thither. Beyond them we saw some stretches of water, which we were informed were the Masurian Lakes. An officer who passed us in a car examined the scene through his field-glasses, and told us that we were looking at the remains of four Russian army corps, that we had won the battle—won it brilliantly—and taken over a hundred thousand prisoners. But all of us in our battalion were still depressed and stood mooning about, staring in front of us, calling to mind the dreadful scenes in the battle we had just fought, and the faces of our fallen comrades; while their voices and the weeping of their families rang in our ears.

On the following morning—we were still almost in the same position—the first rays of the sun revealed the outlines of a large town, which we were told was Grodno. We contemplated it for some time, and, from the outlandish towers gleaming in the sunlight, understood that we were in a strange land surrounded by strange people. We gazed wistfully on the scene.

As I was standing gazing with the rest I felt the first signs of physical discomfort, and was obliged to go to the doctor in the evening. He said I was probably suffering from an attack of dysentery, asked me who I was, and suggested that I should go to the nearest field hospital with the ambulance column, which was just outside. As I was hesitating what to do he made short work of the matter, and ordered me to take a seat by the driver of the first wagon. The train consisted of twelve wretched-looking four-wheeled agricultural wagons known as Russian carts.

Again and again I had to descend from the wagon in order to relieve myself, and each time I found it more difficult to climb back to my seat again. The driver, a man who was slightly wounded, was not very friendly to me, I believe because he had noticed I was well educated. Some people are pleased by such a discovery, others are alienated. Owing to the loss of blood I was growing weaker every moment, and was soon obsessed by the thought of what I should do if I were obliged to get down again. I wondered whether it would not be better to let myself go in my seat, for I was afraid that if I left it I might faint and remain lying on the ground all night and be frozen to death.

We were crossing very hilly country, and I remember that the roads were very bad and that the wounded, lying in the straw in the body of the cart, were constantly complaining and cursing. Horses were lying dead on the road, and in some places peasants were already busy skinning them. Once or twice the wagons had to go over, or, rather, through the middle of, these carcasses.

About midnight we entered a road through a wood; its extraordinary breadth and the tall trees on either side made a deep and solemn impression upon me, and, in spite of my miserable condition, did me good. At some of the clearings there were fires burning, round which groups of men, children, and cattle were collected. They were refugees from the surrounding villages. Close to the road soldiers had lighted fires in tree stumps and were sitting round them. I remember that I felt somewhat surprised at seeing they were Russians, but I took them to be deserters, who had not yet been rounded up by our men. As a matter of fact, however, we had lost our way, and were already deep in the enemy's territory.

CHAPTER XXVI

I am Made Prisoner and Escape

As we were jogging along this stately forest road—dawn was breaking and it was growing light—and just as I had got down from the wagon again, some shots were fired at us from the wood. I was on the point of falling flat on the ground, when I was seized from behind by strong hands, and some Russian soldiers, middle-aged men with beards, accosted me, their eyes full of astonishment. The ambulance column halted, the drivers, Polish peasants, stood trembling beside their horses or fled into the woods, while our wounded cried out and shouted in confusion. Our leader, an N.C.O. who had been wounded, leant against one of the horses. The men who had taken us prisoners continued to harangue us. They could not understand what had happened; asked us all sorts of questions, and obviously did not know what on earth to do with us. They had evidently been lying concealed in some thicket, probably because they had managed to escape from the firing-line; and when, in a bend in the road, they saw mounted troops approaching, they turned round and ran like hares back into the wood.

The troops—a whole regiment—trotted past us; they all looked at us and seemed to be wondering what we were doing. But they trotted on. They must have seen that we were Germans, but on the other hand they could also tell at a glance that we were only a crowd of wretched wounded, hardly able to raise our weary heads to look sadly at them. Our leader was still leaning against his pony, with his arms resting on its haunches, and I now became aware that I too was wounded; for my right trouser leg was wet with blood at the knee.

One of the troopers in the rear of the column—he looked like a Jew—rode up to me and reined in his horse. "Have you no leader?" he asked in low tones, addressing me in German.

When I replied that we had, he told us the way to the nearest field hospital. Then turning to the Polish drivers, who were still standing by their horses, or had straggled back from the woods, he admonished them severely in some foreign tongue, and rode away.

We too then started off once more. The N.C.O. had climbed on to a wagon and had either fainted or fallen asleep. I was the only one walking at the side of the column; and having bound my handkerchief, which was unspeakably dirty, round my wound, went from one wagon to the other answering the bewildered questions of my comrades, who seemed unable to grasp that we were prisoners. The sudden stupendous change in our destiny had completely staggered us. As for myself, I was entirely engrossed both in mind and body—for, as I discovered only a few hours later, my sickness had suddenly vanished—by the fact that we were prisoners, and, moreover, prisoners in Russia! In a trice I had been transformed into an infinitely small and infinitely cautious creature. I was like a fox watching on the outskirts of a wood, or a hare stealing along a furrow. It never occurred to me that I should be of no further use to the Fatherland. Doubtless I felt that any help I could give was insignificant enough, and I was obsessed by the thought of how forlorn, lonely, and trifling my own existence had suddenly become.

I cannot say whether it was a good or a bad thing for me that my wounded comrades should suddenly have regarded me not only as their leader, but also as an omniscient sort of individual to whom they could address all their questions and confide all their fears and troubles. What questions! What fears! What troubles! One slightly wounded fellow, a little lacquerer from Mecklenburg, was delighted to think that now, at any rate, he had the war "behind him," as he expressed it. He was saved and restored to life! It struck him as being quite an amusing adventure to be a prisoner of war, and, raising himself up, he began gratefully to contemplate the Russian carts, the horses, their harness, and the trees in the wood. Another man, a coachman from Lübeck, who was more seriously wounded and whose foot I had bound up, kept up an endless flow of talk about his wife and every one of his children. In the delirium of fever he imagined that he was with them, and that the cart in which he was lying was taking him home. Another was racked with anxiety about his mother, who, ever since he had been in the army, had been living with a sister who was unkind to her. He was also terrified at the thought of being sent to Siberia, which he imagined as a great glistening stretch of ice on which it was almost impossible to get a foothold. The coachman from Lübeck died. We buried him in the wood between two pine saplings on a bed of pine needles, and took our leave of him. The drivers of the carts gave us no difficulty. They stuck fast to their property—the horses and carts—and were probably only too glad that our journey was taking us away from the Front.

On the second day we reached the little town which the Russian officer had mentioned to me. But there was no accommodation for us there, and, after a doctor had examined the wounded and dressed their wounds, we had to move on. We proceeded by short day marches through undulating sandy country, feeding chiefly on potatoes, which we found in the cellars of the houses we passed, and on the bread kindly given to us by columns of troops along the road. On the fifth or sixth day we reached a straggling railway station, consisting of various small broken-down buildings lying in an open field. A doctor of German extraction to whom I talked told me that the station was completely blocked and that it would be some time before we could move on. But as we were provided with food and medical assistance I decided to remain there.

When with the help of one or two slightly wounded men I had deposited my wounded in two railway carriages and had done the best I could for them, I hobbled about the metals in my horribly tattered uniform, watching the work on the sidings and the shunting and departure of one or two trains at both ends of the vast station. The indolence with which everybody seemed to be working was incredible. I would even go so far as to say that what was done one day was deliberately undone the next. Probably the soldiers who were working there preferred to be engaged on this peaceful spot to being sent nearer the Front. Otherwise they struck me as being quite ordinary men. They were kind and friendly to one another, and friendly rather than unfriendly to me. When I tried to pick up a few words of their language there was always somebody ready to help me.

One of our more seriously wounded men died, and when I asked the doctor where I was to bury him he pointed to a wood close by. Halting and stumbling—for we were all wounded—we carried him past a few wooden huts into the wood. We thought that we should have to bury him anywhere, but, lo ! we discovered, between two plantations of birches, a beautiful cemetery filled with wooden crosses of the shape known as St Andrew's crosses, which we had never seen before. We were delighted both for ourselves and our dead comrade, and after digging a proper grave we laid him in it and recited the Lord's Prayer. On the following day we set a simple cross on his mound, which seemed to have sunk extraordinarily fast.

But enough of these details! I will not describe how, with my wretched little group of wounded, I reached a town in the interior, east of St Petersburg, and for nearly a year attended to German and Russian wounded until I became a regular hospital orderly. Nor how, what with home sickness and my longing for intellectual work, I was in danger of falling a victim to the melancholia which had overtaken my mother. I will also pass over the joy I felt when a soldiers' and workmen's revolution broke out in the town—a harbinger of the great revolution which was to follow—and there were rumours that the war would soon be over; nor will I tell how, in the second year of our internment, when winter had come round again, German prisoners would escape under cover of the long dark nights by ones and twos to Finland, and from that time onward formed a constant stream trickling along that route. But, at all events, it was this that suggested to myself and a friend of mine, the son of a fellow-countryman from Holstein, that we should follow their example.

February, however, was already at hand, and we had not made the attempt. We had great difficulty in secretly procuring the necessary warm clothing, particularly the sheepskins. But an old woman who in her youth had once been under some obligation to a German came to our assistance. I believe she had once had a German lover in St Petersburg.

She had brought us the sheepskins and had just closed the kitchen door behind her when we heard a cautious knock. Throughout the autumn and winter numbers of sick soldiers and German wounded, particularly those who were making their escape, had come in by this door to hatch their plots and plans. I gently opened it and saw in the moonlight two fugitives standing in the snow, dressed in the usual Russian travelling garb, which I now knew so well—dirty sheepskins reaching to the knee, a cap of some sort of fur on a bearded and unkempt head, fur-lined boots, and, slung on one side of the leather belt, a little enamelled teapot covered with large black or rusty patches.

One of them, a broad-shouldered, sturdy fellow, asked me in low tones whether I was a German, and when I replied in tones equally low that I was, they begged me for bread and a little sugar. I went back to the kitchen and for the hundredth time promised the second in command there that, after the war, I would give him enough money to fulfil the dream of his life and to buy a little cottage in his native village; and he gave me what I wanted. He believed me when I told him that in Germany I had vast estates, and I made light work of describing the glories of my castle and the number and breed of my horses and cattle, for, in view of the emptiness of my existence, I derived a certain comfort from this exercise of imagination.

When I opened the door again, and the moonlight fell on the face of one of the fugitives, and I also heard his voice, which was full of a broad and genial humanity, I suddenly gasped and asked him where he came from.

"From Schleswig," he replied.

"From Ballum?" I asked in trembling tones.

"Well, what if I do?" he rejoined.

"Don't you know me?" I cried.

With his characteristically free and easy manner he came up to me, turned me to the light with his strong arms, and recognized me. . . . "You?" he exclaimed. "You? You here?"

I was already excited enough by all I had been through, and the thought that I was on the eve of making my escape. And now that my dearest friend was standing before me, the man in whom all the memories of my youth were centred, the tears sprang to my eyes: "My God, Eilert! . . ." I exclaimed. "Fancy meeting like this!"

"What is there so strange about that, little ensign?" he said in calm, friendly tones. And turning to his companion he added with a smile: "Would you be surprised if the moon came down and lay in the snow beside us with an angel sitting on it laughing at us?"

My vivid imagination, ever busy with the wildest fancies, my strange condition and my longing for home, had shattered my spirit. I was a home bird, a lover of peaceful, humdrum life. And Eilert, who had grown ever stronger and mightier, both in mind and body, seemed the only solid thing about me when all else was crumbling to bits, the only clear light when all around was gloom. "Are you going to Finland?" I blurted out. "Will you take me with you? . . . We want to escape too. Please take me with you, though I can't walk very well!" And I showed him the bad wound above my knee which prevented me from straightening my leg.

He asked me whether the wound had healed, and when I replied that it had he thought it would be all right, and urged us to get ready at once. In the end we decided that they should go on ahead to the outskirts of the town and wait for us there. They left, and in wild haste we collected our things and quickly followed them.

And thus we wandered through the long nights, chiefly through sparsely wooded country. All the woods were traversed by broad footpaths made either by the local inhabitants or by fugitives and tramps. Deep down in the soul of the Russian there is a love of wandering for wandering's sake—a sort of longing to flee from his neighbour and from himself. Hundreds of years ago we Germans were probably in the same state. When, owing to snowdrifts, we were in doubt as to our direction, we steered our course by a little compass belonging to Eilert's friend, a watchmaker from Hamburg, a quiet, silent man.

I walked most of the way at Eilert's side, occasionally speaking to him. But by midnight I was always tired out.

This was not entirely due to my injured knee, but to a certain inborn delicacy of constitution, for I am not so big in the limb as most of my countrymen. When I felt like this I walked by his side in silence. Towards morning, when we were trying to reach some house or hiding-place in the distance, I was always at my last gasp. Then he would put his powerful arm about me and help me on. But the snow was very deep and walking extremely difficult. Sometimes other little groups of fugitives would catch us up. But as a rule we met only Russians, who were secretly wandering east or west. Among them were quite a number of strange Mongolian faces, probably natives of Eastern Siberia, who had escaped from the Front and had conceived the daring plan of reaching their distant homes across Finland and Sweden.

I was deeply agitated by all I had been through and by the fact that I was trying to escape. When I had the strength I talked of Germany, of the war, of my home and the people there, and of Eilert's mother and sister, and my jaunt in the latter's boat. How far away it all seemed! I spoke of Auntie Lena, Sven Modersohn, Balle Bohnsack, Eva and Ernemann in America, Engel Tiedje, and Gesa and her death, about which somebody had written and told Eilert while he was near the Urals in East Russia. All these people and events seemed very far away, as though they belonged to a different world. But far away as they were they still stood out in lively colours in my memory, and my heart beat fast when I thought of them. But Eilert looked with calm, indifferent eyes across the broad, melancholy landscape and said little, and when he did speak he was quite unmoved. Nothing excited him, not even the situation in which we found ourselves. All that life brought him merely inspired fresh images and pictures in his calm and childlike soul; he had no wish to alter anything; he merely wanted to marvel. And thus he lived silent and serene, quietly observing everything the hour brought.

When we reached some shelter, whether in the morning, afternoon, or evening, he was always the spokesman. He had already been on the road for a year and spoke Russian well; and his great hirsute face, and his careless natural manner, occasionally lit up by a flash of fire, pleased people. After we had been given some bread and tea or soup he would take the little sketching-block from the bottom of his coat-pocket, and then he seemed a miracle-worker in the eyes of our hosts. He would draw their low-ceilinged room with the great stove, the baby in the cradle, or the old grandmother; or he would make a portrait of the young wife, with her soft fair hair, her blowzy features, and lithe, voluptuous form. Then he would tear the paper up amid a chorus of lamentations, and, smiling with his clever eyes, and making all kinds of promises I could not understand, would go on drawing again. He was just as lively and content as if he had been in one of the fishermen's taverns of Ballum, Hamburg, Emden, Amsterdam, or Normandy. We would lie asleep or half asleep in one corner of the room, overcome with exhaustion after a difficult march through the snow, while in another corner, at the deal table, on the bed, on the floor, and in the little cradle, everything was awake and astir. The beautiful young daughter, half-undressed, would sit before the broad-shouldered man with his confident smile and talk to him. As he said his prayers the little son would peep through his fingers to look at the stranger, and the grandmother would open her watery little eyes to watch the man and the woman at the eternal game of capture. The father or the brother would sit on the floor or on the table, drinking with the artist from a bottle containing a crystal-clear liquid until they were intoxicated, when they would creep to the stove or sprawl on the floor.

I think it was in the neighbourhood of Lake Ladoga on the twentieth day of our march that we turned north, and in the afternoon reached a lonely settlement of three houses on the outskirts of a wood. We wanted to go on still farther, but Eilert, after getting into conversation with the inmates of the last house, suddenly decided to spend the night there. When we entered the hovel, which, as far as I can recollect, consisted only of one low-ceilinged room, the first thing that caught my eye was a buxom young woman, and I gathered from her expression that it was because Eilert had seen her that he had decided to remain. He soon set to work to draw her, and was very lively, and ordered schnapps to be brought. The young woman, whose eyes were growing heavier and heavier every moment, had to go out to fetch her people, for she lived next door. They came in, and an animated discussion took place, during which the men and women kissed and cuddled each other. The rest of us, who were exhausted by our march through snow-covered woods, sat apart and availed ourselves of the unaccustomed opportunity of this early rest and the daylight to wash and louse ourselves, as we were terribly tormented by vermin. Then we lay down and went to sleep.

I don't know exactly what happened, but the young woman must have been the cause of the commotion, for we were awakened by the sound of loud cries and slamming doors. A moment later Eilert came to us and told us we must be up and off as quickly as possible. We staggered up, pulled our sheepskins on, threw our knapsacks over our shoulders, picked up our kettles, our ropes, and our hatchets, and went out. When we had turned the corner of the house, and were floundering along in the bitter cold night against a blizzard, we saw lights in the other hovels and heard people shouting and rushing towards the hut we had just left, and we hurried away.

For the first few hundred yards we ran, then, settling down to a walk, the Hamburg watchmaker solemnly consulted his compass, and determined our bearings; we were out of danger! It was then that I first noticed Eilert had no sheepskin on. I was horrified and asked him whether he had had to leave it behind. He said he had, and from his voice I gathered that he was cross and miserable. An icy cold wind was blowing snow and hail into our faces. We suggested that we should take turns to lend him our sheepskins, but he curtly refused. So we went on in silence, keeping as close to him as we could, so as to protect him from the wind.

When the short day had turned to night we reached a straggling burnt-out farmhouse, in one room of which there was a fire burning. The watchmaker crept up to it, and came back with the report that a number of Russians were sitting inside, but that they were not regular soldiers and we had nothing to fear from them. Whereupon we crept cautiously into a little room, on the opposite side of the farmyard, which still had a portion of its ceiling undamaged.

Pressing against the wall, to protect ourselves against the wind, we cut up a charred board with our knives, kindled a small fire, and tried to melt some snow in a kettle. Meanwhile I could not help looking anxiously at Eilert from time to time, as I was very much afraid we should lose him. His lips were compressed, and I saw him shake himself now and again in his clothes, to drive out the cold which was penetrating him. We had again offered to take turns in lending him our sheepskins. But again he had refused, saying that in our weak condition we could not survive without them for half an hour; which was, of course, quite true. We tried to find more wood, so as to make a bigger fire, but it had all been burnt or used. Nothing was left but the stone walls and here and there a few patches of plaster. From the other side of the yard we heard the Russians singing and making a noise.

I felt certain that Eilert could not get through the night, which was getting colder and colder, without falling very ill; and, unable to endure the sight, I got up and went across the yard to the room where the other men were. Standing in the shadow on the threshold, I gazed at the occupants in the light of the moon and the fire. They were dirtier than we were, but they were quite warm in their sheepskins and looked very fit. They were talking Russian, and at times I seemed to catch the sound of some other East European language. To judge from what remained of their uniforms, and the fact that they were very young, I imagined they must be deserters and marauders, chiefly of Mongolian race. Their leader, a gaunt Kirghiz—at least, that is what I took him to be—had a wild red beard. He was leaning comfortably and solemnly against a wall, with the lid of a large teapot on the side of his head and a rifle in his hand, while the Kirghizes or Kalmucks, or whoever they might be, were kneeling before him doing him homage. Meantime he kept his eye steadily fixed on a large bottle of crystal-clear liquid that was being passed round and round. Close beside him, sitting on the floor, which was burnt black, there was a little man whom from the cut of his features, though I could only see him indistinctly as he was sitting in the shadow of the leader, I took to be a German. In his left hand he was holding the remains of some strange-looking lute, which he touched from time to time, and the way in which he moved his fingers suddenly reminded me of Bothilde's lover, Dieter Blank, of the Bohnsacks' farm. But it was only a passing thought, and I immediately forgot it. What made me examine him more closely was the fact that he was wearing a particularly fine brown sheepskin, and all I was thinking about for the moment was how to get a sheepskin for Eilert.

I was standing looking enviously at the sheepskin and feeling quite desperate, when suddenly a noisy quarrel, accompanied by much laughter, broke out among the party. I did not know what it was all about, but the leader settled it by laying his hand, a horribly dirty freckled hand, on the filthy dishevelled heads of the two chief combatants, and with a sort of confident unctuousness said a few conciliatory words which had the effect of calming them. The gesture and the fatherly tone of voice raised my spirits, and reminded me of something similar buried in the far-away past. But still I did not recognize him. It appeared that he had found fault with the singing of the others, and had maintained that he and the little man with the lute and the beautiful brown sheepskin could give a far better performance. He now leant comfortably back and to my great astonishment exclaimed in the best Ballum slang: "Now, then, fire away, dear brother-in-law, and I bet a sheep we can do it better than the Kalmucks!" And so saying he began singing: "Sally, if your shoe pinches, it's because your feet are big!"

The whole room, the fire, and the group of men round it swam before my eyes, and my heart stood still. I could only stare at him. He was unspeakably filthy, filthier than he had ever been in the worst period of his youth among his oxen and calves. It might even be said that he had gone back to his primitive state. But he was extremely lively. Singing at the top of his voice, he gesticulated with his hands in mock Chinese fashion, tapped the others on the head, knocked off their fur caps, or pulled the bottle from their lips. At last I drew nearer—I am sure my feet faltered—and, while he and Dieter Blank were still singing, I exclaimed: "Balle, I'm here!"

I believe he had already seen me, though I don't think he had recognized me. But he was an extraordinary creature, and whether he acted spontaneously, was pretending, or only trying to tease me, I don't know; but, as usual, even at this moment, which was one of the tensest excitement to me, he still spoke in his calm grandfatherly tones. "Sit down, my son," he said, "and join in our song."

They sang the song to the end, and while those about him were still shouting and singing, I told him all about ourselves and the danger threatening Eilert. I had also shaken Dieter Blank by the hand. I noticed that his face was bloated by years of drink and that his eyes looked besotted. He was drunk at that moment.

Balle got up and went with me to Eilert. "We want you to let us take turns to lend you our sheepskins," he said.

But Eilert still refused.

Taking Balle aside, I said in tones of deep distress: "He won't live until the morning. . . . What can we do?"

Balle went away, and I once more sat down as close up to Eilert as I could, so as to keep him warm, and the others did the same. But when we opened our coats to lay the corners over his knees or across his breast, he pushed them off, whilst now and again he would shake himself to ward off the numbness that was overtaking him.

At the end of half an hour Balle returned. I rose and went up to him. I had a mad forlorn hope that he had thought of some way out. From my earliest childhood I had regarded him as one who overcame every obstacle, and who could go through fire and water unscathed.

He reeked of schnapps. "Not so long ago," he remarked in his nonchalant way, "he was still human; but now that he has been a prisoner of war for two years, and taken up with those Moujik topers, he is an absolute drunkard. He drinks like a hog." So saying, he went away again.

I sat down by Eilert again to shield him from the wind, and we remained thus for some time. Our two friends had fallen asleep. But Eilert did not sleep. With calm eyes he stared into the darkness before him. His breath froze on his beard, and his right hand glided over his knees as though he were drawing figures.

Then Balle came back, and I got up again. He reeked more strongly than ever of schnapps, and observed, as it were quite casually: "A little while ago, when he was quite sober, he was quite well aware that life no longer had any meaning for him. He admitted himself that he was nothing but a drunken sot and that it would be better if he were dead. And that's what I think too. It is better for some people never to return—better for themselves and better for those who belong to them."

I don't know whether I guessed what was passing through his mind, but I felt terrified and my heart beat wildly. "Are you talking about Dieter Blank?" I asked anxiously.

He closed one eye in the old familiar way, while the other eyebrow jerked wildly up and down. "Yes, my son, I am," he replied slowly.

I said nothing; he went away and I sat down again. The noise and the singing in the other room grew louder, then gradually died away.

But again he returned, stinking more than ever of schnapps, and his voice was rather thick: "Anyone would think," he said, "that he wanted to drink me under the table. But nobody has ever succeeded in doing that! I suppose it's because I never say die! But is this wretched business with my sister to start all over again and go on for ever till she is old and grey?" And he staggered away again.

I had remained silent, looking at the floor. When he had gone I sat down again, and listened to what was going on across the yard. Everything was quiet.

Soon he came back again, and he had the fine brown sheepskin in his hands—I recognized it by its colour. Raising Eilert, who was quite stiff and had fainted, we put the sheepskin on him and covered him up well; and taking off our own skins put them over him and rubbed and shook him until he grew warm and fell into a deep sleep. Then, getting into our sheepskins again, we lay down close up to him, and thus we remained. Balle

Bohnsack looked calmly across the yard through which the snow was driving.

"I really couldn't kill him," he observed after a while. "He must have a stomach like a paving stone. So I said to him, 'How much do you think you are worth? . . . I mean as a man? Are you worth three marks? . . .' He replied: 'No, brother, I am not. No, I am not worth a good bright three-mark piece.' I said, 'Over there in that hovel there is a man who is worth thousands of marks, and he will freeze to death if he doesn't get your sheepskin.' Then he said, 'Take my sheepskin off me, brother. I can't take it off myself. I'm too drunk.' I replied, 'You must say that three times.' He repeated it twice more, and then I pulled his sheepskin off."

He was silent, and I buried my face in my hands.

"Yes," he continued after a while, "that's how it happened. Do you suppose my sister liked him only for his daring eyes and his violin? There was something more in him, something great. . . . She is a whole-hogger too in her way."

I imagined him lying over there in the other room with the rest of the drunken crowd, without his sheepskin, his small, sinewy body doubled up and slowly growing stiff. And I gave a great sob in my hands. After sitting in silence for a while, my old friend observed: "One must distinguish between one man and another and act accordingly. Don't we do so with animals? Everything has its proper value."

"I don't know that it is for us to judge," I replied.

He did not answer for a moment. "I have done it now," he said at last.

It was the first time since I had known him that his voice, although confident, was melancholy and slow. After a while he added in the same measured tones: "Which petition is it, the fifth or the sixth?"

At first I did not understand; then I replied the fifth.[1]

"Now let us go to sleep," he said after a while.

But I could not sleep.

On the following morning, when we were about to continue our journey, I looked in at the door of the other room. He was lying there, a small thin figure, doubled up beside the dead fire. The wind had changed slightly, driving the snow over him, and he was already beginning to get covered. The others were sitting there with callous, besotted faces, half turned away from him, round a fresh fire, and were making their morning tea. Eilert was feverish, but he was able to go with us.

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[1] This refers to the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer.—Tr

I believe we were ten days on the road after that terrible night before we reached the frontier of Finland in the north.

From that point onwards we were led by visible and invisible hands. During the day we slept in some hut, generally on the banks of a lake, across which the wind blew the snow. In the evening, when it was getting dark, people would appear—chiefly quite young men and women, and frequently mere girls—who would lead us on foot, or in little sleighs, across lakes and over fields, all night long in a westerly direction. Balle Bohnsack was our leader, and we left everything to him. He was still as strong as ever, and as he was constantly meeting fresh people he was very lively. Of course he had no difficulty in speaking Finnish at once, or whatever language he was called upon to speak. In any case he entertained himself in the liveliest fashion with the good people. Eilert, a prey to feverish delirium, lived in his visions, while I, lonely and weak, and bad at languages, sat by myself and took no part in the conversation. I could only show my gratitude by shaking hands with the grown-up people and stroking the cheeks of the children. On the thirtieth day of our flight we got into the hold of a fishing-smack, and pushed out to sea, and, with a good sou'-wester blowing, against which we had to tack, reached the Swedish coast three days later.

Balle made a speech to the two fishermen who had brought us over. At first they listened with a smile, and at last they had to laugh. Then we stumbled along to a hut which they pointed out to us in the distance. It was built of black beams, and two reindeer, a doe and her calf, were tethered to the door at the side. An old woman, who, if I could judge from pictures I had once seen, looked like a Laplander, came to the door. She knew at once who we were, and, going back into the hut, began to light a fire. I sat for a while with the others, leaning forward with my hands on my knees, utterly exhausted. There were an old man and a child in the room, who stared at us, and feeling I wanted to be alone I went outside to the back of the hut.

There I prayed long and earnestly, not a prayer of thanksgiving for having been saved, but a prayer full of wonder and astonishment, for I had seen miracles of beauty and terror, and had come through with treasures which, as it seemed to me, time could not destroy.

CHAPTER XXVII

An Eventful Week

We remained two days and nights in the hut. I was confused and unspeakably tired, and slept most of the time. Eilert was weak with fever. Balle was up and about the whole while. When on the third day I went out and gazed wearily about me I saw that there were other huts under shelter of a rock. I went towards them and found Balle talking to a crowd of Lapps about some reindeer. Apparently the animals had something the matter with them, and, to the accompaniment of many a lively gesture, my old friend was telling the people in his usual deep voice how to cure them. When he saw me he left them and came back to the hut with me. As the sun was shining, we sat down in our sheepskins on a wooden bench outside the door. "They are decent fellows," he observed, and, looking round, he added: "It is very pleasant here, on the whole."

I replied that I did not know any spot on earth which he would fail to find pleasant.

He looked a little suspiciously at me out of the corners of his eyes. "When spring comes, they all go north," he observed, "crowds of men, reindeer, and dogs, and do some lively business." And he proceeded to describe how the people and the animals spent their time.

I did not say very much, but merely listened. I was too depressed and indifferent.

Meanwhile he went on talking. The people were too callous about the well-being of their animals and too slow and careless in business. It would be interesting to steal like a fox through the country; he was sure that in a couple of years, without a penny in his pocket, he would have secured a fine herd for himself.

"I quite believe it," I replied, "and incidentally you would have escaped the war."

Holding his neck very stiff, he looked straight in front of him into the distance. "Yes, that's true," he said.

"It's not for me to say anything about that," I observed. "I am a cripple and shall never be sent to the Front again."

He was silent for a while. "You mean, my son," he said at last, "that I ought to go back and lend a hand again, otherwise the flock of sheep will never get across the stream?"

I agreed.

"I remember," he continued, after a moment's silence, "that one of our schoolmasters told us how King Charles of Sweden led his people into a war that was too much for them, and how they returned to their homes from every quarter of the globe limping and in rags. And when they got back—those of them who did get back, and there were not very many of them—they found their houses in ruins and the grass growing in the streets of their towns. Do you know anything about that?"

I replied that, as a matter of fact, it was perfectly true.

"Well," he proceeded, "don't you think Germany's going the same way? I mean that the Kaiser has bitten off more than he can chew, and we, like the old Swedes, are returning from all corners of the globe to our homes to find nothing to eat there. . . . The people here, my son, say that it looks as though things were not very grand in Germany—there is hunger and misery everywhere!"

"It may be so, Balle!" I replied. I was worn out and full of doubt and fears.

"Everybody I spoke to in Russia, and I talked to heaps of people," he said, "thought we had gone ahead too quickly with our fleet and our commerce, and had become a menace to the honour and existence of other nations."

"There may be some truth in that, Balle," I said. "But now we are in trouble, and everybody who can must go and help."

"I thought," said Balle, "that it might perhaps be better for Dina and the two children if I were to stop here in a hut with a little herd of reindeer, rather than go back to Ballum and cut down the grass in the streets, possibly to feed a goat on."

"It's not for me to say," I repeated, "for I shall never be sent to the Front again. But you will have to go back to the firing-line."

He was silent for a while. Then he said: "So you mean, my son, that it is my damnable duty, although the whole thing is a most infernal and hopeless mess, to go to Altona again."

I nodded.

He gazed silently towards the Lapps, who were still standing in groups about their animals. And I believe a terrible struggle went on in his breast, not so much because he would be exposed to fresh danger, but because he would miss the fine deals he felt he could make here. "It really is a wonderful opportunity for making a bit of money," he said, turning to me again; "but if you really mean what you said we shall be off to-morrow morning."

I went to Eilert in the hut. He was very tired, though his fever had abated. I persuaded him to come out with me to enjoy the sun, and when we had been sitting on the wooden bench for a little while he had an opportunity for the first time of examining his sheepskin by daylight. He looked it up and down for some time, and then in rather a depressed tone of voice he said: "I say, when we were going through that burnt-down farm the other day, and I had no sheepskin, I noticed, as we passed, a little fellow who had a sheepskin exactly like this one, brown with a leather belt. Am I right, or was I dreaming?"

"It's perfectly true, Eilert," I replied with some emotion.

"I have been thinking about it in my fever," he continued after a moment's silence. "How did you get hold of it?"

"That little fellow," I answered, "was Dieter Blank, a neighbour of Balle and his sister in the old days, and Bothilde's lover for seven years. You remember that big girl Bothilde?"

He nodded. "That great big corsair woman? And Dieter Blank was her lover! Quite right! She told me about it."

"Yes," I said, "that's it!" And I hoped he would ask no more questions. But, looking at me, he persisted: "Well, what next?"

"Yes," I stammered, "Balle and I rather thought it would be a good thing for Bothilde if he never went back. He was an unreliable fellow and a drunkard, and she could not tear herself away from him."

"Really!"

"And then we discussed who was of greater value—you or he."

"Really!"

"Yes, and then Balle made him drunk."

"Oh, indeed!"

"And when he was drunk he grew melancholy and magnanimous, and gave you his sheepskin, and Balle said that it was because he had these qualities that Bothilde could not tear herself away from him."

"A true woman," he observed. "Fire is what they want, even if it is sulphurous."

"That is how it happened," I said.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. And after a while he added mockingly: "You wonderful judges!"

We did not refer to the subject again, and I told him that Balle and I had thought of continuing our way on the morrow.

"I really do not know what I ought to do," he observed after a while. "I have not much natural feeling for things that mean so much to other men—the Fatherland, the Empire, conventional marriage, and so on. I am more attached to natural universal things, like land and sea, water, air, humanity, animals, love and beauty, spirit and strength. Besides, I have good friends in Belgium, France, and Holland—dear people, some of them actually holy people. Also, while I was a prisoner of war, I lived for a year in the house of one of Tolstoy's disciples, and met with nothing but kindness and love in the midst of imprisonment and death. People in Ballum used to talk about the Gospels, but I saw no sign of the Gospel spirit. But in that hut in the Urals I did. I don't like shooting men, it goes against the grain with me."

"So you will stay in Sweden?" I said.

He shook his massive head. "No," he replied, "I won't do that! I will go with you. A man like myself, an artist, should not wander too far from his age and his people. I will join the ranks again, and endure what has to be endured.

But I refuse to take aim and shoot men. I am a man of life, not of death."

He wanted to say more, but Balle came up to us with some Lapps and we discussed our journey.

A week later we had managed secretly to cross Sweden and the sea beyond, and on a rainy day in April we arrived at the principal station in Altona from which we had originally set out. We went to the barracks to report, and half an hour later we separated at its gates, having been given a fortnight's leave. Eilert went to friends in Hamburg, and Balle returned to Dina, while I booked a little room at the Schleswiger Hof in Altona.

I was unspeakably exhausted, both physically and mentally, and spent three days in complete idleness, sleeping the whole night and half the day, and spending the rest of the time in the hotel lounge, with my hands in my lap, watching the activity about me as it were through a mist, while the events of the last few years and thousands of human faces passed in slow and solemn procession through my mind. On the fourth day, though still tired and weary, I began to talk to my host and the visitors, and to ask all kinds of questions and look at the papers.

And then I learnt that what I had heard in Lapland was true, and that things were no longer going well with Germany. Whereas at the beginning of the war there had been a feeling of exuberance and plenitude, now there was an atmosphere of want and anxiety. Whereas at first people had had faith in their rulers and believed they had a good strong Government, they were now bitterly aware of injustice and laxity in many quarters, and a suspicion that the authorities were supporting crumbling and decayed institutions had taken the place of the conviction that the Army and the Civil Service were efficiently administered. While it was true that the conduct of affairs might not have been particularly brilliant, it was believed that at least it was in the hands of men of understanding, members of old and experienced families. But now people saw incapacity in every quarter. And, worst of all, whereas at the beginning of the war everybody had believed that Germany had been innocent and had been driven into the conflict by the other nations, now I could see that the idea had gained ground that we too were not altogether guiltless, not so much from wanton wickedness, perhaps, as through stupidity. This feeling oppressed the people, who set a clean conscience and justice above all else, and it paralysed the energy of numberless worthy souls.

These discoveries made such a deep impression on my sensitive nature and gripped me so firmly that I was tormented night and day. I began to see that defeat was possible, whereas until then it had been unthinkable; and, as anybody who has read one or two of my books may imagine, I tried in my own way to find a deeper interpretation of this stupendous fact. Could it be the outcome of divine retribution? But no, that would not do! All day long I remained in the hotel, pondering these matters, and in the evening and half through the night I would wander about the deserted streets and along the shore as far as Blankenese, where the spirits of my dear departed would often join me. At last, after many a dark, despondent hour, I humbly resigned myself—for nothing else could save me—to acquiescence in human imperfection and trust in the justice of God, believing that everything had a holy meaning which I, as a spirit temporarily imprisoned in human form, could not understand.

When I had recovered my equanimity in this way I happened one evening at dusk to be going through Övelgönne, and seeing a light in my father-in-law's house I went in.

My father-in-law welcomed me cordially. He told me that his eldest son, Thomas, the farmer, had gone down with his torpedo-boat near the Skaggerak, but that, as far as he knew, the others were safe and sound. His hair had grown much whiter, but he was as straight and as smart as ever. All his club men were at the war, and in their absence he had founded various clubs for women and boys, which were already flourishing.

Presently my mother-in-law came in, and greeting me with tears in her eyes said that she now perhaps had two children buried beneath the waves.

I tried to comfort her, and asked what she meant by "perhaps." She replied that it was surely quite possible that they might both be alive still.

I agreed that there was just the ghost of a chance.

"Postal communications have been cut off everywhere," she continued. "Only when we have won—and we certainly shall win, Holler—shall we know whether Gesa was not perhaps picked up by a liner, and whether Thomas did not perhaps reach Sweden or Denmark in a fishing-smack or something."

I observed that as they were both good, pure souls we could comfort ourselves on that score if they really were dead. But although she agreed wholeheartedly about Gesa she thought Thomas might have been gifted with a little more imagination and energy.

Sitting at her lace-work, which always seemed to stimulate her fancy and her emotions, she told me about the others. Apparently they were all getting on splendidly. Adalbert had unfortunately been obliged to leave the Mayor of Hamburg, and was now in Belgium with his brother Hieronymus. She did not know exactly what they were doing, but she believed they were engaged on some earth or road works. In any case, to judge from their letters, they were held in high esteem,. and were having most brilliant careers. At least, that was what she read between the lines. They were too modest to do more than hint at it.

I could not resist glancing at my father-in-law as I listened, and noticed that he was winking at me and had a somewhat supercilious expression on his face, as was always the case when his wife or one of his three sons indulged their fancy.

I then asked after her youngest son. She said he was the pride of her life. He was so brave and clever that he had already been commended again and again by his General, and had been offered a commission. But out of consideration for his fellow-soldiers, with whom he had been associated for three years, he had refused it. He had merely asked to be allowed to continue his Chinese studies, and his request had been granted.

As she then proceeded to expatiate on what would happen when her brother returned from furthest Ind I remained only a little while longer before taking my leave. My father-in-law accompanied me for a short distance, and after walking in silence for some minutes he suddenly exclaimed: "You know Mother!"

I replied that I not only knew her, but also loved her.

"My youngest boy's commanding officer has merely written to me to say that he is a jolly good soldier," he said.

"All your children are good," I replied, from the bottom of my heart.

He smiled. "The other two are only privates in a labour battalion, doing hard work on poor food, and building some road in Belgium!"

The affection I had always felt for him prompted me to ask him how it was that he had never been able to get his wife and children to look facts more squarely in the face.

"My dear Holler!" he exclaimed, shaking his fine white head, "I tried to do so when my wife was young and the children still small. But you know her childlike eyes? I could not wound them with flints. Another man might perhaps have done so. . . . Whether it would have served any purpose, or would have made those eyes see more clearly, is another question . . . but I could not do it."

On leaving him I thought over all I had seen and heard, and all I had experienced at the hands of Gesa's family. When my first flush of enthusiasm and admiration for her and her family had subsided I had for a time regarded them with a certain distant contempt. But to my surprise I found that this feeling had vanished and that I liked them all, and thought of them with tender emotion. And then my mind wandered to all the other figures that had played a part in my life. For the first time after three years of terrible agitation and suspense I was able to think calmly and collectedly of my beloved parents, of Engel Tiedje, and all my other friends. I saw the Hellebecks' farm in the sunshine of my childhood, with beautiful Frau Hellebeck, Almut, and Hans. I saw the Bohnsacks, Auntie Lena and Uncle Gosch, and remembered how Eva had ruled me and how much I had admired Ernemann. Then I saw Eilert Mumm drawing, and getting drunk and raving as he drew; and Barbara on her perpetual daring quest of adventure. And I conjured up the picture of Hans, sunk in hopeless filth and stupor, with Almut coming to the rescue; and of

Gesa laughing and kissing me and sailing away never to return. Close on the heels of this came the war, with all its terrible memories, culminating in the tragedy of Dieter Blank's sacrifice. All this passed before my eyes, and as I pondered over it all I saw that everything, both living and dead, had now assumed a fresh perspective, and that I had grown quieter, calmer, and more just, and that miracle after miracle, passing all understanding, had taken place.

On entering the lounge of my hotel I sat down alone, and once more gave myself up to thought. In the old days I had been able to endure loneliness only when my mind was occupied with reading or writing, or observing nature. Now, it was only the terrible experiences that lay behind me that made me long for solitude. All about me people were anxiously discussing the war and the possibilities of peace, a subject every aspect of which I knew and was sick of. The proprietor offered to light up, but the guests preferred to remain in semi-darkness yet a while longer.

Just at that moment a new visitor arrived and passed by my table; and, looking up, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a fine handsome officer in a smart uniform without an overcoat, whose gracious, condescending voice caused me instantly to recognize him as Fritz Hellebeck.

To judge from the way everybody addressed him he was evidently regarded as a person of considerable power and importance; and the proprietor as he offered him a table respectfully asked him whether he was on leave.

In his leisurely, pompous way, Fritz replied that he was, and hinted that he had some business to settle, partly of a private and partly of a political nature.

There was a respectful silence, after which the proprietor humbly observed that he hoped he was quite well and asked whether he had come from a dangerous sector.

"Oh, not so bad!" he replied. "Heavy shelling and bombs from aeroplanes; but not so bad! . . ." What a grand confident manner he had—just as if he had the power to determine when and where the shells should fall!

When he was respectfully asked what his job was he replied that he was supply-officer to a General in the field.

"Oh, really! Really!"

Then glancing about him and noticing the empty glasses on the other tables, he called for drinks all round, and, remarking that an officer on active service often did not know what to do with his money, proceeded to give a boastful description of his duties.

In the middle of it a timid tap was heard at the window. I immediately guessed that he had arranged this in order to gratify his vanity.

And as a matter of fact he jumped up and with a conceited smile observed: "Ah, that's a fellow who wants to discuss something with me . . . a private matter. . . . To-morrow I shall go to Cuxhaven and the next day back to the Front. . . . My bill, please!" And pushing some money towards the proprietor, he added: "That's about right, isn't it?" and left.

When he had gone I got up too, and, running into the proprietor at the door, I told him that I was an old acquaintance of the officer who had just left, and asked him whether he knew how he was getting on in business.

The proprietor told me that for some time he had posed as a merchant in a big way, but had lost the bulk of his fortune; though Dutti Kohl, a doubtful sort of character, had been partly responsible for this. Afterwards he had carried on business alone, dealing in houses and mortgages—dealings on a small scale which were not always above suspicion.

I described the state of affairs at the farm, explaining that although the farm itself belonged to Fritz the meadows were the property of his wife, who was living with his half-brother. And I asked whether he knew how things were in that quarter.

He replied that Fritz had divorced his wife, who was now married to the half-brother, and that the couple were living on the little farm on the edge of the wood.

As I was turning all this over in my mind I saw three men walking on the opposite side of the street, under the limes, which were still bare. I should not have noticed them or even have been aware that they were there if one of them had not jingled some money in his pocket, reminding me of my boyhood's friend.

"There he goes again!" I whispered, and asked the proprietor what sort of fellows his companions were. Somehow they had aroused my curiosity, possibly because they did not look like natives of the town.

The proprietor replied that they were strangers to him, and just at that moment one of them, turning aside, knocked his short pipe out against a lime tree in a manner that seemed familiar to me. I tried in vain to recall where I had seen him before, and it was only long afterwards, at the most tragic moment of my life, that I remembered he was the man whom I had met at Fritz Hellebeck's house, and who was said to be the brother of an English peer.

On the following morning I received two letters.

One was from Uncle Gosch, in which he told me how delighted he and Auntie Lena were to hear that I had escaped from Russia. He also reported that the Basileia theory was making good progress, that Eva had been married two years to her employer, the Danish doctor, and had a little boy, that her husband, whose name was Modersohn, had turned out to be the brother of Sven Modersohn of Copenhagen, and that Eva's son was also called Sven! On account of her husband's delicate state of health they had moved to Los Angeles in California, and I was to write to them at once and tell them that I was alive and well. Finally he informed me that Ernemann had a flourishing business in tropical fruit. There was nothing in all Uncle Gosch's letter about the war, and I presumed that he either did not know about it or had forgotten that it was on.

The other letter summoned me to report at a certain hour at Corps Headquarters.

At the appointed hour I limped to the place, and a sergeant-major sent me to a colonel, who, among numerous other questions, asked me whether I could speak Low German and English. When I said I could, though my English was not very good, he inquired whether I would like to make a little journey during my leave.

I replied that I would.

He then told me that things looked "very rotten" in America. The English were blackening heaven with their lies, and the Americans were on the point of coming in against us. But a German over there had set aside a fund to provide for three propagandists, and he wondered whether, as I could no longer be employed at the Front, I would care . . .

Feeling highly honoured, and being only too anxious to give whatever help I could, and also remembering Eva and Ernemann and the joy it would give their dear parents if I could see them, I replied, with a blush, that nothing would please me better than such a mission.

I spent three hours with him, receiving all kinds of ironical, shrewd, and ungodly instructions—all of which were foreign to my cautious, thoughtful, and positive nature; whereupon he handed me my papers, in which I was described as a Dane from North Schleswig, and told me to take the first train I could catch to the foreign port from which I was to sail.

A week later I was on the high seas.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A Journey and a Memorable Meeting

I do not propose to describe all the events of that terrible voyage, with its constant difficulties and alarms. I will pass over my feverish rush from lift to lift in New York, and from town to town across the vast continent, while the conflagration of lies and insults against Germany increased to such an extent that we, who were the advocates of Germany's cause, and our few friends and helpers, could no longer cope with it. Suffice it to say that the moment had arrived when the great American people stood wavering between two alternatives, although it was already plain that the scales were weighted against us.

I was stupefied by the long railway journeys and the interviews I had been having. But what bewildered me most of all was the hatred of Germany which I could read in every newspaper, in every word that people uttered, and in every face I looked at. I don't think I could have endured these overwhelming evidences of hatred and hostility if I had not been able to bear in mind the sweet little haven of peace and love which I knew awaited me beyond the raging waters I was in, somewhere in Los Angeles, where I would be able to sit once more with the two dear friends of my poverty-stricken but oh, so happy childhood!

It was evening in one of the new towns in the State of Oregon, and we were on a ferry crossing the Columbia River, when with sudden vividness this terrible contradiction flashed across my mind—the German people imagine that the mighty American nation wants to terrify and humiliate them with noisy theatrical thunder; but the truth is that this young country, strong as a giant, is arming itself with a religious fervour that extends from sea to sea against our people whom it believes to be evil and accursed of

God. But Germany is already bleeding to death! Germany is done for!

I sat exhausted and half paralysed by this most appalling of modern spectacles—the sight of a giant nation driven mad by a lie. I was in the modest home of a man of German origin, consulting him as to what I should do. At last we decided that I should destroy my German papers and travel quite openly to New York with the Danish papers I had, and thence proceed to Denmark; but that, just to prove my *bona fides*, I should go round by Los Angeles and visit the friends of my youth. I heaved a sigh of relief, and in all the tumult about me I kept that blessed isle of peace steadily in view.

On the following day I reached Los Angeles, and although it was late afternoon in the month of April the streets of the town were oppressively hot.

I knew, or had guessed, that Dr Modersohn, who was more of a scientific man than a physician, lived in modest circumstances; and, truth to tell, the nearer I drew to his quarter the meaner and humbler did the streets and wooden houses become, till at last I came to the neighbourhood of ugly, unfinished streets with small one-storied wooden cottages where he lived.

Looking for some one whom, without unnecessary risk, I might ask to direct me to the house, I happened to catch sight of a little fruit shop, with its rows of apricots, peaches, and bananas shielded from the sun by an awning. I saw that there was some one there, and with an intentness that quickly turned to astonishment I eagerly scrutinized the back of a young man's curly and rather boyish head as he was shutting the place up for the night. . . . Suddenly he straightened himself and turned round. It was Ernemann!

He was dressed in a check shirt and wide cotton trousers, his brown hair had prematurely receded from his temples, above which it clustered in curls, and his handsome face was as boyish as ever. Deeply moved I gazed at him with eyes full of affection and examined his shop. So this was the business in tropical fruit which Uncle Gosch had told me about!

I crossed the road and called his name. He looked up and stared as though I were a ghost. Then, stammering my name, he threw up a leaf of his counter, dragged me behind it, let down the awning, so that we were almost in darkness, and with tears pouring down his face kissed and hugged me and asked after his parents.

He told me all about his chequered career, his experiences as a farmer, waiter, sawyer, and musician, and said that for the moment he was a greengrocer by day and played the violin at an hotel at night. As he was talking he began to take some smart evening clothes and a clean shirt from a chest, and I concluded that the shop in which we were standing, together with the chest and its contents, represented the whole of his property.

Resolved to make him as happy as I could, I told him that Hans and I were convinced that Fritz had stolen the money, and that I had told the latter so three years previously. He was overjoyed, and seizing my hands asked me whether his mother knew.

When I replied that if she did not know she at least suspected it, his eyes filled with tears, and sobbing bitterly he kissed me again.

Meanwhile he had finished dressing, and although his evening jacket was a little bit the worse for wear he looked quite respectable.

Lowering his voice to a whisper, he then informed me with obvious delight that at midnight that very night he was going south by car with three other young Germans, to try to reach Mexico, whence he hoped to be able to get to Germany and proceed to the Front. The thought of making an honourable return to his native country—he was thinking of the theft—was driving him almost mad with joy. But I could not help feeling very strongly that, in addition to his longing to see the Fatherland again and to help it, he was also tremendously excited at the prospect of making a further change in his career, and I was also certain that he had not the faintest idea what the Front was like. In this he was his father's son. So I watched him pack his little suitcase, which was all he was going to take with him; and when, like the dear Ernemann of old, he looked for something to give me, I was forced to accept a particularly fine peach and a little penknife.

By this time it had grown quite dark, and an elderly man appeared, who was going to take over the shop. He paid Ernemann the money for it, and when this business was over Ernemann conducted me to Eva's house. As he was afraid they might try to prevent him from carrying it out, he had told them nothing about his plan of flight. So he asked me to wish them good-bye for him, and, kissing me again, vanished in the shadow of the trees that lined the street.

I was so deeply moved by all that I had gone through in the last few days, and especially by the meeting with Ernemann, that I felt I could not present myself immediately before the one creature on earth who seemed entitled to demand most of me. So I wandered about for a while outside her house, taking stock of the ugly mean street, while I passed in review the various incidents of our joint lives, and all their joy and sorrow, up to the moment when we had parted for six long years in that wretched little Schleswig station. And now I was to see her again in a strange land, the wife of a man who had perhaps always been an enemy of our country, and the mother of his child! Heaving a deep sigh, I at last ran up the wooden steps of the house, and cautiously entered, as though I was afraid the floor were going to give way beneath my feet.

No one appeared, and I was beginning to think the house was empty, when a soft, dreamy woman's voice came from a room at the back, saying: "Is that you, Frederick?"

I recognized her voice, and immediately guessing that she was with her sleeping baby, whom she did not wish either to wake or to leave, I went through to her on tiptoe, and, standing at the door, saw her in the gloaming, sitting beside the child's cot. She was a little stouter, her red-gold hair was a little thicker, and her voice deeper; otherwise she was the same as ever. "Don't be frightened, Eva," I whispered, still standing at the door. "It is I . . . your old friend!"

She started violently, but remained seated. "Come in, Holler!" she said in soft low tones, as though she were dreaming. "How nice of you to speak so gently! You see . . . I did not scream when I saw you standing there. . . .

For I was with you all. . . . I had Mother, Father, Ernemann, and you before my eyes. We were sitting round the table, and Mother had just said something ridiculous, and we were all smiling, as we often used to. I saw each one of you quite clearly. The world is full of miracles! Only at lunch to-day Frederick was telling me that Ernemann was going south, and then on to Germany, to help. And my thoughts had gone with him." I went up to her and whispered: "I have just seen him. He is already on his way. I was to wish you and your husband good-bye for him. . . . But, Eva, tell me . . . have you a good husband?"

We were standing hand in hand in the middle of the room. She leant close up to me and said: "Yes, I have. I was quite certain I should have, for hadn't I been his assistant for two years?" Then, gazing intently at me and trembling, she added in a choking voice: "How you have changed! Come and sit by me so that I can hold your hand . . . and tell me everything."

So I described my last visit to Stormfeld and Ballum, and told her about Almut and the two Hellebecks, and also about my book, Gesa's death, the war, my experiences as a prisoner, my escape, and my mission in America, which was now at an end. And when I had finished we stroked each other's hands and blurted out broken words of affection.

I was delighted by her friendliness, and felt an intense desire to press her cheek to mine. But memories of my childhood still made me shy with her; though with shining eyes I told her how delighted I was after all these long years of suffering to see her face again. "All my troubles," I said, "even my despondency and home-sickness, have vanished now I am sitting with you!"

We chaffed each other for a while. I said she had always been hard and stern with me, while she maintained she had always been kind, and in any case had invariably been prompted by affection. I agreed and reminded her of various incidents that proved it.

She blushed, and, putting her hands in mine, begged me in blissful confusion to recapitulate more of our childhood scenes.

I reminded her of how she used constantly to stroke the hair over my temples, saying that it grew so attractively.

"Yes, and it does still," she exclaimed, stroking it again; and her voice quivered and her hand trembled and dropped from my head.

Still I did not guess what her real feelings were. As a sex we men are extremely dense. All I knew was that she was as friendly to me as ever, and, moved by delightful memories of the past, I began to recall other episodes. With tears in her eyes and distress in her voice, she now begged me not to go on, but to discuss the future.

In a trice the delightful memories vanished and I remembered my country's terrible plight, and the pain and anguish of all mankind, and I grew sad. With a heavy heart I told her about my plans, and said that I wanted to start back home in the morning.

We were discussing this when Dr Modersohn came in. He was one of those tall, spare men of pure Frisian breed, who are very delicate, and inclined to consumption and asthma—quite unlike his robust and jovial brother of Copenhagen. Like all men who from childhood have been aware of their physical weakness, he had a cautious, impartial, and lucid mind. Occasionally interrupted by shortness of breath, he spoke in gentle, measured tones about the war and its causes. "I do not think Creation or the Eternal Powers have any idea of guilt or innocence," he observed, "but only of the right and wrong way. Now the whole of mankind, Germany included, have been on the wrong track; and this war and all its terrible consequences will put her back on the right one. All human upheavals have done this."

I asked how Germany had gone astray.

"All ancient people," he replied, in slow, measured tones, "and later Portugal, Spain, France, England, and so on, had their moment of prosperity and brilliance. And they grew haughty, overweening, and thoughtless, and consequently imprudent, foolhardy, over-ambitious, and careless of the traditions, rights, and feelings of other nations. They paid no attention to things of the spirit, and became spiritually backward and coarse. And thus to the rest of mankind they seemed an obstacle to progress and to all that was desirable. And although the other nations were themselves guilty in other ways, they united against the haughty nation and pulled it down from its perch. And that is what has happened to Germany. She injured France, Denmark, and Japan, more than was right or necessary. She was a disturbing neighbour to Italy and Russia, and alarmed England and the whole of the commercial world by her restless, hasty, and haughty behaviour. Everybody rightly felt that she could not be trusted, that tomorrow she might do anything. And that is how the feeling of the whole world has been roused against her. Much that is false and deceptive may lie behind the feeling; but the facts I have mentioned are at the bottom of it."

"And what about England and America?" I asked hotly. "They are surely bursting with overweening pride too!"

Shaking his small anæmic head from side to side, he replied slowly: "England has been lucky! At the time of the Armada, and again in the days of Napoleon, she was lucky. She was an island. But when she ceases to be an island . . . and to-day she is no longer an island . . . then her hour too will have struck. For she is haughty. And haughtiness, which makes a people blind, imprudent, and confused, is the cause of the downfall of all great nations. America will go the same way."

And he proceeded to prophesy that through the intervention of America Germany would be beaten, and that in the fury of the struggle she would be harshly treated, plundered, and deprived even of her just right to existence. But she would recover again, as all the other nations had done who had made the same mistake in the past, and then things would go better with her than ever before. For only after her defeat would the road be cleared for a great free German people.

So new and terrible were these thoughts to me that I cannot remember what else we talked about. All I know is that when at last I left them I lay awake until the small hours.

When I entered the sitting-room the next morning Dr Modersohn had already gone to his laboratory, and Eva and I went out into the garden.

I asked her whether she was satisfied with her life in Los Angeles.

"Not in the least!" she replied emphatically, shaking her fair head. "Am I not my mother's child? True, I don't turn my house into a sort of general hospital and mental home, as she does! I shouldn't like to. But I do feel the need of a hard day's work, or rather a hard morning's work, and now you will see what I do."

Whereupon, taking little Sven to his father, she fetched a coupé car from the garage, which she drove herself, and, bidding me take the seat beside her, drove through the most fashionable streets of the town, stopping to inspect and give advice and instruction at the gardens of about twenty private houses. As we drove along she explained that in this way she saved these wealthy people all trouble in connection with their gardens and gardeners, and, what was just as important from her point of view, held out a motherly hand to about seventy or eighty people, mostly old men, who were badly in need of her help.

It was at once a matter of surprise and some little distress to me to see her thus engaged, and then to have her at my side again at the steering-wheel. She seemed so near and yet so strange to me. She had become a society lady, although the same old Eva still peeped through, whether she was talking to a gardener or brushing some dust from the sleeve of my jacket. All the same there was still something separating us, which caused her embarrassment, and made me feel shy of looking into her pure, healthy face, so close to mine as we sat side by side in the car. But I did not know what it was. All I knew was that it caused me faint distress.

At last we returned to her house, and were alone in the sitting-room.

She looked at me strangely, probably noticing my careworn expression, and stroked me. Then, when I kissed her kind hand, not knowing what to say, she whispered with a smile: "You mustn't be so sad. You still have a lot of good friends, including myself."

"Really?" I rejoined bitterly. "Certainly I shall have your parents, and perhaps Ernemann if the war does not swallow him up. But you will stay here—you, the queen of my childhood!" And my eyes shot fire at her.

"Don't say that! . . ." she cried, turning pale and trembling. "Oh, don't say that!" . . .

"What's the matter?" I exclaimed. I did not yet see what was the matter, because I did not think it possible.

"You must not look at me or speak to me like that!" she stammered in great distress.

Then, suddenly, in a flash, I saw it all. And I was filled with such astonishment and ecstasy that I was struck dumb and could only look at her.

Again she begged me not to look at her.

At last, recovering my tongue and trembling all over, I said: "I never dreamt that you felt like that—no, never!"

"I didn't know it either for a long time," she said very softly, still pale to the lips. "It was only when you married Gesa that I found out. . . . And now I feel it taking hold of me!"

I detected the note of bitterness and reproach in her voice. "I was a little village waif, Eva," I protested, "the son of a working man . . . I am not exaggerating . . . I was like a little beggar-child at your court . . . that's how I felt towards you! Besides, you loved Eilert, who was so much older than I. That was the whole trouble. I never dared to think of you in that way."

She was pressing both hands to her breast, as if she were in torture. "When Eilert went away that time," she continued in agonized tones, "my feelings turned to you, and I thought that was how it would end. . . . But you went on being such a brother to me!"

"But you were still a queen to me, Eva!" I repeated, "and I was only the penniless little boy you had adopted. I have only just got rid of that feeling. I am only beginning to feel a man towards you now. Oh, if only you were free! I have always loved you best all my life!"

Her little boy came in and interrupted us, and she picked him up. "All right, Holler . . ." she said, pale and trembling, "now be quiet. But it was fine . . . it was fine to hear it! But now you must be quiet and control yourself. Look, I've got the child in my arms, and my husband is outside!"

We tried to control ourselves; we tried to speak of other things, but we could not.

I stood up. "Let me go, Eva," I said. "This is intolerable. Let me say good-bye. Perhaps we shall see each other again when things are more peaceful. I can't bear it!"

I kissed her hand and her hair, and she stroked me in her old way.

I kissed her child and told her how fervently I wished happiness to her and every one belonging to her. Then I went out, and did not look back.

Before dawn I was sitting in the train that was rushing me back to the east.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Crash

At this point my pen begins to fail me, and my heart is filled with unutterable sadness and weariness. Am I justified in laying before the present generation all the horrors of the last months of the war, as described in the next few pages? Have I a right to inflict this on the old over whose last years it has cast a shadow, on the young whose *joie de vivre* it has destroyed, or on the children, the dawn of whose life it has saddened? All of you who were in the firing-line during the last months—those months in which its face completely changed and which were the cruellest in the whole war—you know what it was like! But you who were not there do not know. But because you too had your share of suffering perhaps it is right you should remain in ignorance to this day and even longer. That is why I shall write down only what is necessary for the elucidation and proper understanding of my own insignificant little existence and the lives of those in my immediate circle.

As I could not be a combatant I was given the job of studying the morale of our troops both at the Front and on the lines of communication, of examining English-speaking prisoners, and of reporting the result of my observations from time to time to a General Officer. It was work that suited me, for I liked to mix with simple folk to study their moods, and to practise dissimulation, not in my own interests, but in those of the common cause. Besides, the object was a noble one; for to seek the truth and tell it must surely be a good thing! Nevertheless, it was a heartrending business, for what my colleagues and I—and we were distributed over all the army zones—had to report grew more and more terrible from day to day.

I had been at this work for about a year, when—it must have been in September—I chanced one day to be sitting in a *café* in some village in the north of France, about twenty miles from the Front, surrounded by the remnants of an infantry company which, under the command of a subaltern, had just returned from the firing-line. The men were nothing but skin and bone, and looked like ghosts. There were twenty-five of them. Their eyes shone out of their beardless faces under the brim of their steel helmets with a strangely unreal and feverish solemnity; their uniforms were indescribably filthy and torn; many of them in the heat of battle, or through pressure of illness, had actually fouled their clothes, and they stank most horribly. From the house opposite, which the signs about it proved to be a casino, came the sound of a man's voice trying to sing a song after the style of a cabaret singer. The subaltern, who was sitting by me, told me that he was leaving his company to take over another command, and proceeded to describe the ghastly days of fighting they had just been through. He said the morale of his men was very low, but that, badly fed though they were, the company was going to be reorganized immediately. A fresh subaltern would be placed in command, who, in spite of knowing nothing about the nature and difficulties of the present kind of warfare, would have to stand up in front of them, read them the regulations again, and instruct them in their duties in face of the enemy! The men were sitting doubled up and staring silently across the street. At last one of them asked: "Have you got one of those English hand grenades with you?"

"What do you want it for?" asked his companion. The other replied that he wanted to throw it into the first Base casino he came across, so that the people there would learn for once what war at the Front was like. A Base officer, in a smart, clean uniform, happened to pass; but the men went on talking or sat silent, looking contemptuously at him, without attempting to salute. Soon afterwards a fat, sleepy, well-dressed major came over from the casino and met one of the men who had gone a little way up the road to post a card. The man passed him without saluting. "I say, you lout!" shouted the major, purple with rage, "don't you salute an officer? Helmet straight! Points of fingers to the eyebrow!" Springing to his feet the subaltern went up to the major, and, without saluting, said in tones of icy contempt : "For God's sake, push off, man, or you'll find a piece of steel between your ribs!" The major turned pale, stepped back, and moved off. Presently an orderly came from the Commandant of the place and gave the men their billeting papers. Whereupon they all stood up and with bent knees disappeared round the corner of the street.

As soon as they had gone another group, who had been sitting in silence at the other end of the room, suddenly became lively. I shifted my position so that I could watch them unobserved. They were reinforcements, consisting of boys of about eighteen years of age, whose smooth faces and expressionless eyes informed me instantly that they had not yet been in the firing-line. They were keeping up an animated flow of conversation—boys' talk. When an officer came along the road they sank back in their corner and were silent, while one or two stirred as if they wished to slink away. As soon as he had passed they laughed and scoffed and abused him behind his back. One of the youngest of the party declared that they could not remain much longer without being found out, but the others maintained that they would be all right, and there was no need to worry. The man who seemed to be their spokesman said: "We shall say that we are stragglers, and if, after all, we are forced to go forward, we shall let ourselves be taken prisoners at once. It would be too stupid to get shot for the sake of the war profiteers in Berlin and Hamburg!"

An officer, whom I could see at a glance had been at the Front and been wounded, came along and saw them sitting there. Probably guessing what was passing through their minds, he went up to them and questioned them. The spokesman, who a moment before had been behaving so truculently, was suddenly transformed. He sprang to his feet like a child, and politely answered the questions with a feigned air of frankness and deference which might well have filled an actor with envy, but which, alas! was now all too common among the German people. He explained that, owing to a mistake on the part of their group leader, they had become separated from their main body, and had only just discovered where they belonged. The group leader had just that minute gone to the Commandant's office, and in half an hour they were going south. The officer was obviously some worthy education inspector or magistrate, or the head of some small government office, and was probably trying to do his best as a soldier. But he was destitute of any native worldly wisdom, and was therefore utterly unfit to be an officer. He believed the young whipper-snapper's tale, murmured some patriotic words, to which they all listened with an expression of child-like innocence, and then left. As soon as his back was turned they burst out laughing.

I continued to watch them, sick at heart with thoughts of what I had gone through. Presently a tall, dignified N.C.O. came in. He was thin and dirty and wore that expression of feverish and exaggerated earnestness with which I had become so familiar at the Front. Suddenly he started, and coming up to me sat down beside me; but it was only when he was seated, and I could look into his eyes under the brim of his steel helmet, that I recognized Helmut Busch, the ferryman's son.

We greeted each other cordially, and related our experiences, and, as usual, when called upon to describe my job, I pointed to my wounded knee and showed how far I could bend it. I then asked after his people.

He told me that four of his brothers were in the field, that one of them had been killed, but that the others were safe and sound. His father was still running the ferry, and his mother was at home looking after the younger children in the same old way. He added that Balle had returned to the Front immediately after his escape, and was with his old regiment—the one to which I was shortly to be attached. Dina and her children were quite well, and they all crossed the river every day with her father to spend a few hours with her mother and talk about those who had fallen and those who were still alive. Then, sighing heavily, he added: "Our battalion was to have had a fortnight's rest, but orders have just come along that we are to go back into the firing-line to-morrow, and every time we go forward we lose half our men. So you see how much chance I have of saving my skin! When you see Ballum again give my love to my people!"

I tried to change the subject, and asked him whether he had good officers and men.

He nodded in his stiff formal way, and described the nature of the recent heavy fighting, saying that our supplies of men and munitions were diminishing every day, whereas those of the enemy were increasing.

Convinced as I was that he was a born leader of men, I asked rather bitterly, "How is it you haven't got on better? You ought to have been a captain by now, and you are still an N.C.O.!"

He shrugged his thin shoulders. "My father was a poor man," he replied, "and could not give me the necessary education."

I told him that was ridiculous, explaining how Frederick the Great and Napoleon had acted in regard to this all-important question.

We sat in silence for a while, full of bitter thoughts. Then I asked how he imagined the war would end.

He replied that all hope of victory was at an end.

Knowing how clever he was, and how well he understood the soul of the masses, which made his opinion all the more hard to hear, I asked him what he considered was the reason of this, for I had been thinking the matter over night and day for a long while and was asking everybody their opinion.

If I am right in my recollections of the day and the mood he was in, he replied more or less as follows: "All our leaders are men of 1870 and 1871. They neither know nor suspect that since then the soul of the German and of the Western European generally has completely changed. They imagine the masses still believe in the old Kaiser and Bismarck. But the masses have had two Kaisers since then, first of all old Bebel[1] and then that secret all-powerful Kaiser whom old Bebel called into existence—the proud and headstrong self that lies hid in every man. What is the Kaiser to the common soldier? At most a symbol which leaves him cold. What is the officer? Nothing but a man with greater privileges and higher pay, a creature of greater intelligence than himself possibly, or else a fool. You can imagine how many officers seem fools in the dispassionate eyes of the common soldier." After a moment's reflection, he added: "We might possibly win, but in that case all our leaders, from the Kaiser downwards, would have to confess that somehow or other they had made a mistake both in psychology and strategy. They would have to recognize that the army is gradually falling to pieces, and that they are not winning, despite the bravery and untold self-sacrifice of our men. And then somewhere in the army an officer of genius would have to be unearthed, a man of about thirty, or perhaps forty, an up-to-date man who, while he saw things with a clear, cool eye, gave no thought to the past, but said to himself, 'The soul of the German army and of the people at home is in such and such a condition, and I must lead them accordingly.' He would immediately have to be given supreme command. Then he would revolutionize both the army and the people at home, from attic to cellar; he would be cruel but just; he would purge the higher powers and allow all the forces which lie deep in the hearts of the people to rise free and unfettered. But neither the people at home nor the army know of such a man, or think he is to be found. Possibly the antiquated system on which the army has been run has not been favourable to his production. Possibly he really does not exist, in which case we must abandon all hope and make up our minds to defeat and to another kind of revolution—a revolution from below, a foul and despicable revolution."

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[1] The Socialist leader.

I felt this revolution was already on its way. I had seen signs of it.

As we were discussing the matter I watched the people about me, as I always do when I am listening. Suddenly I saw an officer coming along and, striding at his side with extraordinarily long swinging steps, a young woman in nurse's uniform. The two were obviously flirting heavily. I have a sharp eye for such things. He was making love to her and she was keeping him at arm's-length, though none too resolutely.

As soon as I recognized her and turned quickly to my old friend, scrutinizing him intently, he too looked at me, and with a tightness in his throat exclaimed: "Do you see her?" Then he added scornfully: "She is here on soldiers' welfare work. She gave me a cup of coffee yesterday."

Forgetting, like a man, that I too had once had an adventure with her, I felt angry with both of them, and standing up, exclaimed: "How do you do, Barbara!" The officer smiled condescendingly at us. "Old acquaintances?" he observed, and took his leave.

"Fancy finding you here!" I said. "Did you expect adventures here?"

She looked at me in her provocative way. "Yes, what could I do at home?" she replied with her usual frankness and intelligence. "You can't think how dull and boring it is there!"

"I suppose so!" I replied. "All the young men are away, though I am sure Dutti Kohl is there." I was furious with him! The mere thought of him nauseated me, particularly when I imagined him in connection with my beautiful cousin. But I was even more angry with her.

"Oh yes!" she answered, "he is still there, but he thinks of nothing but business now."

"So I should imagine," I replied. "With Germany in her death agony, he must be waiting to play the carrion crow. Where is Eilert?"

My words had evidently given her food for reflection, for she answered absent-mindedly: "At a remount depot, somewhere in France. But he is painting most of the time."

"And your mother?"

Her intelligent brow puckered, and she looked hard at me. "On Dutti Kohl's advice," she said, "Mother has sold some more meadows. Do you think it is right?"

"Oh, what do I know about such things?" I cried. "You must see to that yourself!"

She had cast only quick, covert glances at Helmut, and their eyes had met in the usual cold and calculating manner. But now she turned to him, and looking haughtily but with a certain coy confidence at him she said: "You are a business man, and a very efficient one, I am told. What do you think about it?"

I felt how little money and property and the problems connected with them must mean to him at that moment. "It's all plain enough," he replied, coldly and indifferently. "When a storm is raging one does not leave port!"

The matter-of-fact tones in which he spoke, and the apt simile he had used, again impressed her with his vigorous manliness. His dirty tunic, his earnest feverish eyes, and the feeling that he was a brave soldier who was doing his duty, all combined to warm her passionate heart probably for the first time in her life. And a beautiful blush, which reminded me of Iva, suffused her cool little face. "Thank you," she said, with a kind of cautious provocativeness. "Thank you. I will write and tell Mother that." And springing to her feet, she shook hands and left.

"It's an awful shame about that girl!" I exclaimed indignantly.

Helmut was pale and the hand that was fumbling with his tunic was trembling, but he answered calmly enough: "She must have her fling. If she is lucky and ever gets an honest man, she will be faithful to him."

We shook hands and parted.

A week later I was limping in the rain through a little town about six miles behind the firing-line. The streets and houses were nothing but a heap of ruins, and between the fragments of walls that still remained standing remnants of furniture, stable equipment, and harness lay in sickening confusion. A low line of battered wall indicated the direction the old streets had taken. The survivors of two regiments who were quartered there had put duckboards across the ploughed-up gardens and shattered houses, and over the mass of ruins that covered what had once been streets. They were living in the cellars, the entrances to which they had protected by piles of stones. Now and again a fall of shell would howl or whiz over these retreats. At night scores of shells from heavy guns would pour down with savage violence on this position, sending up fountains of dust and flame mountains high into the sky and filling the air with horrible smells. Everywhere there was gloom, depression, and a strange silence beneath the shrill roar, while the air was heavy with the stench of burning.

Taking shelter behind a strip of wall, because the bombardment was growing heavier, I asked a man who was kneeling by me what his regiment was. When he told me that he came from Sylt, I asked about various acquaintances there, and he gave me news of people, some of whom I knew, saying that they were either dead or still up and about, or else in hospital. He knew Balle and Ernemann, and told me that they were in the neighbourhood and that he had seen Balle only a few days before. Then after a moment's silence he added thoughtfully: "They have been sent into the firing-line again and have probably been killed; for things are in such a state there now it is impossible for anybody to come through. . . ."

At that moment a troop of men from the front trenches passed silently by. They were caked with mud and blood, and, evidently quite familiar with the place, stumbled in single file over the ruins. We both stood up and followed them, and as we did so passed the body of a little girl who had been killed months ago by a shell and buried, but had been unearthed again by a recent bombardment. Pushed and shoved rather than advancing of my own free will, I went down into the cellar with the men. It was a spacious place; six rickety and horribly dirty tables stood on the damp filthy floor, and round them sat and reclined a number of soldiers. The whole place stank most horribly.

Taking my place in a corner, I looked at the men who had just come in. They were as black as niggers with sweat, dirt, and gas, and under their steel helmets their eyes shone piteously and anxiously in their gaunt faces. One of the little band was so weak that he had to be supported by a friend, who found a seat for him. Their commanding officer, a short, terribly emaciated subaltern, was doubled up with pain and constantly had to go out. His men were trying to persuade him to give in and report sick, but he stubbornly shook his head. At the entrance, on a fragment of wall, sat a red-haired N.C.O.; his filthy uniform was in tatters and all covered with blood, and he was weeping aloud. I asked a subaltern who was sitting behind me in silent thought what was the matter with the man. Looking up, he replied: "He has lost the whole of his group. All killed!" Then glancing at the weeping man, he added: "But what I have gone through is worse than that!"

He saw the inquiry in my eyes, and continued in a whisper:

"There were still thirty men remaining of the third company on our left, quite close to us; they were surrounded by the English and held up their hands. Oh, horrible, horrible! They held up their hands like this! . . . And those on our right. . . ." And his voice dropped even lower.

"And those on your right? . . ." I repeated. Leaning towards me and looking at me with great feverish eyes, as though he were begging me to believe what he was telling me with such reluctance, he proceeded: "Well, they did the same. . . . And there was no need for them to do it. . . . They went over of their own free will! Horrible! Horrible!"

An N.C.O. came over from another table and sat down by the subaltern and the two began talking about various matters. In low bitter tones the N.C.O. referred to a speech the Kaiser had made. They had been standing for two hours in the rain; they were hungry, badly fed, and freezing. At last the Kaiser's sumptuous car drove up and he made a speech, the upshot of which was "Carry on! Carry on!" "Oh, he knows nothing!" the man exclaimed. "He does not even know that when two airmen go up from our side twenty go up on the other to fire into our shell-holes, and that when ten guns fire on our side a hundred fire on the other. He has never seen the tanks ploughing through our thin lines, while we are lying in shell-holes behind machine-guns. He has not seen the giant Canadians charging, and the clammy corpses and the shell-holes full of dead, and the way we sway backward and forward with mad eyes starting out of our heads, and how at night we creep into stinking dug-outs filled with rotting corpses and turn the English bodies over and over to see whether we can't find scraps of bread on them to still our hunger. Day after day we lie with sprained limbs in our dug-outs and shell-holes, freezing from cold and from loss of blood, doubled up with hunger, and using English pots and pans for our meanest needs and emptying them at night. When it is dark we rob the dead. We are no longer human beings; we are beasts! What does he know of all these things? What does he think the firing-line is like? Why does nobody tell him what it is like and what goes on there? Why doesn't one of his sons say, 'Father, don't say these things any more! Don't talk like that! This is how things really are; this is how we stand. And the men all feel it. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry knows you are talking about things you have never seen!' Who knows except us what the front line is like? Hardly anyone above the rank of a company commander. Nor could it be otherwise. But, in spite of all this, we are sent back to the firing-line again and again. But soon we shall be at the end of our tether, and not one of us will ever see Germany again."

Just as he finished an N.C.O. stumbled down the stairs, looked slowly round, and sat down at the table nearest to me. I noticed that quite a number of the men seemed to know him, and that one or two of them tried to smile; and when, attracted by his voice and movements, I looked more closely at him, I recognized Balle Bohnsack.

He looked terrible. His tunic and stripes were unspeakably muddy and filthy and full of holes made by barbed wire or shell splinters. His hands were bleeding, his clean-shaven face was thin, and his squint was worse than ever.

For a while he sat and listened. Then he said that he could not stand their conversation any longer, that he was a good-natured chap, and would try to do something to raise their spirits. So from one of the pockets in the rags about him he withdrew a bottle and a little piece of bacon. They all stared at him with eager eyes; then, seizing their haversacks, they produced some bread, and presently one or two glass jars containing a rather thin and unsavoury looking jam appeared on the tables. He began by filling up the glasses which were passed round, then he cut slices from the piece of bacon, and, raising the bottle, began to make a speech in his old familiar way, with one eyebrow jerking wildly up and down. "Friends and comrades," he said, "I am delighted to welcome you in these august surroundings, under the salute of the guns"—the whole cellar it may be mentioned was shaking beneath the heavy shells that were falling above our heads. "The champagne is excellent and the ham delicious, and though we have not got a rag to our backs we are the conquerors of the world. To-day we have certainly received a slap in the face from the English, but I dare wager a sheep that we have smashed hundreds of them and shall smash hundreds more!" Then, turning to various soldiers in turn, he promised to make one Duke of Lithuania, another King of Finland, and another Caliph of Baghdad. Their spirits revived a little with the schnapps and the buffoonery; some smiled, others fell asleep with their heads on the table, and others talked in tired voices.

I got up and took a seat by my old friend.

CHAPTER XXX

Fritz Hellebeck

We were engaged in an animated conversation, when a short, fat subaltern, with closely cropped iron-grey hair and a large dirty piece of sticking-plaster on his broad bleeding chin, came in and ordered us all to get back to duty. I went out with the rest, and was separated from my old friend without even being able to say good-bye.

I drove back to the village, in which Corps Headquarters were stationed, in a motor lorry that was coming back empty from the Front. The place was still quite undamaged. Presenting myself at the Commandant's office, I wrote my report to the General sitting on the floor of the porch, as crowds were going in and out, and there was no room anywhere else.

As I was sitting there a group of very young officers collected close by. They were obviously fresh from home, and had probably come from some Officers' Training Camp, for I could see that they were quite unaccustomed to their new dignity. Presently an older officer, tall and broad-shouldered and of imposing presence, entered into conversation with them. His confident, condescending tone of voice struck me as familiar, and, cautiously looking up, to my great surprise I saw that it was Fritz Hellebeck, and I quickly bowed my head over my papers.

He put on tremendous airs before these boys, who, ignorant about conditions on this section of the Front, were filled with anxiety, though they had left home with the best will in the world. They constituted an audience after his own heart, and he talked to them in the slow measured tones of authority, saying that the General to whose staff he belonged was a most efficient man and an excellent tactician, that everybody in the place was charming and that it was a joy to associate with them.

One of the young officers, who obviously saw no prospect of being asked to play a part in this life along the lines of communication, inquired what things were like in the firing-line. My old school-friend, in the benign tones which he apparently reserved for drafts on their way to the Front, replied that the men were all doing their duty splendidly, and that the English were beginning to get stale. "I think, gentlemen," he added in his friendliest tones, "that you will spend Christmas at home." When one of the young subalterns, in a disconsolate voice, mentioned how depressed and hopeless people at home were, and how dangerous this spirit was, Fritz, with grandfatherly dignity, inveighed against the unreasonableness of such an attitude. The authorities ought to be more severe, he maintained. "All the people have got to do is to obey and hold their tongues until things have been settled at the Front!"

Yes, I thought to myself bitterly, that is your opinion, and your opinion happens to be right. But it is just like you to be here safe and sound, while others are risking their lives in hunger, misery, despair, and responsibility.

Unable to endure the sound of his voice or the sight of him any longer, I quietly got up. But at that moment he saw me, for he was constantly glancing from side to side at everybody, to find out whether they were looking at him. He pretended not to recognize me, but whether this was due to the altercation we had had some years previously, or to the fact that I had only an N.C.O.'s stripes on my arm, that I was very dirty, and, owing to fatigue and agitation, quite unpresentable, I do not know.

As I was standing outside the door, an elderly officer came up behind me, laid a hand on my arm, and whispered: "Might I ask to see your papers?"

I gave them to him and he examined them. "Do you know Lieutenant Hellebeck?" he asked as he returned them.

I replied that he had been a friend of mine at school.

He then inquired whether I considered him a man to be trusted.

I started. "Certainly not!" I exclaimed, and said no more.

He then asked me whether I knew that he was acquainted with foreigners. Suddenly, like a flash, it dawned upon me what he was driving at; and, with my heart in my mouth, I told him all I knew—about the Englishman I had met at his house and of what I had seen in front of the Schleswiger Hof in Altona a year previously.

The officer shook his head thoughtfully, as though he could not believe such a thing was possible. "My old school-fellow is vain," I added; "it is a passion with him to shine, particularly before strangers," or words to that effect. I was desperate and upset by the thoughts that were surging in my brain, and, turning aside, I vomited.

The officer left me. I finished my report sitting on a broken wagon, and while writing I was again asked for my papers. The town or village was full of officers, moving restlessly hither and thither and collecting in small groups and talking. There seemed to be a feeling of uneasiness everywhere, as though something was pending. Troops arrived in motor lorries, and marched across the fields towards the firing-line. Left and right, from the direction of the Front, the roar of the firing grew louder and louder, sometimes culminating in a deafening burst like thunder. Towards evening, in order to carry out my duties, I again went forward, through the sulphurous heaps of ruins, stinking of gas, which had once been a town. The enemy's fire had grown fiercer, but it was drowned by a heavy roll of thunder on both flanks, sounding like huge laden lorries tearing over a wooden bridge. Dusk was falling.

I cannot remember where I halted that evening, for what happened during the night obliterated everything else from my memory. I know that I found myself in a cellar lying close to the ruins of a church, possibly it was actually under the church. The horribly gloomy vault was lit by two candles, and was full of wounded, sick, and exhausted men, broken in body and soul. A medical orderly was attending to the wounded. The steps leading to the surface were occupied by men driven half mad by what they had been through, leaning with their hands against the shaking walls which threatened to fall down on them at any moment. Some of them screamed out in shrill whining voices, but nothing coherent was said or heard in the tumult and confusion. Nevertheless, I gathered that the enemy had for the last few days been attacking with material which was probably twenty times superior to our own, and were now cautiously advancing, that our Front was only thinly defended by various little groups of men, numbering from five to twenty, who were lying in battered old trenches or shell-holes, and that the whole line had been under such fierce fire for the last two hours that it was no longer possible to hold it. A wounded man, whose leg I bound up several times, though I could not stop the blood from oozing through, explained, gesticulating wildly in the air with his thin dirty hands as he tried to find the right expression, that in the front line they had been like "moths in a storm" . . . "like mice in a whirlpool." The enemy's artillery, aviators, tanks, and machine-guns were turning the earth upside down, transforming the soil into dust mixed with deadly gases, "and our artillery, our aviators, do nothing! No, it is more than human nature can stand. . . . This is the end. All my pals are dying. . . . There were five of us. . . . Three have already been killed. . . . Now the last of them is dead too. . . . And I am dying here. We are all dying. . . . And that is as it should be . . . for then it will be over . . . over . . . over! . . ." And he repeated the word again and again.

Unable to endure the fetid atmosphere and the groans any longer, I cautiously stepped over the bodies of the men who were lying about and made for the exit. Outside I stumbled across broken tiles and stones, glass, and pieces of furniture, and followed the side of a wall until I came to a gap, through which, in the light of the bursting shells, I saw a group of unwounded steel-helmeted men silently lying huddled up against a piece of wall, which afforded a little protection. Moved by a common impulse to seek cover they had gathered there. When a shell fell close by they moved and groaned, as though the group they composed were a single animal. Sickened by the spectacle, I ran over the duckboards covering the ruins, tumbled down twice, and, picking myself up, reached a broken-down trench, in which a wounded man and a dead man were lying, and leant against the traverse to recover my breath. Cones of machine-gun bullets were striking the ruined walls above my head.

I peeped over the edge. In front and on both sides of me a storm of explosions, dust, smoke, and evil smells was raging—everything quivering in the intermittent light. Not far off red star-shells rose from time to time over the ploughed-up, quaking ground. Now and again the crash of hand grenades and desperate cries rose above the tumult. Once or twice I fancied I saw the forms of men springing up and disappearing again. Farther away in the distance the flashes of the enemy's guns lit up the horizon, their shells howled over my head and dropped on the ruins of the town behind me, and, farther back, left and right, on our artillery, whose activities I could not follow on account of the ruins between. The shells shrieked, now shrill, now low, the charges in the shrapnel rattled against the hard road and the ruined walls of the houses, and now and again, as though a storm had suddenly blown up, the burst of falling salvos rent the air like thunder. Roaring and howling, the hurricane crashed and hurled its meteors over our position, over the ruins of the town and over our artillery in the rear. Two bread-carriers stumbled past me with their loads. When they were about ten yards away they hurried past a spot where graves had been torn open by falling shells. Another shell fell and blew one of them to bits and hurled the other back into the trench at my feet. He put a hand to his arm, from which the blood was pouring, and moaned that the men in the firing-line had had nothing to eat since twelve o'clock the previous day. A young gunner subaltern tried to get by me, in order to go forward. We ducked our heads as a shell fell and I shouted to him. But he merely shook his thin gaunt head in silence and floundered on.

As I was standing there a number of forms suddenly sprang up before me out of the craters and shell-holes. They were hardly visible in the darkness and smoke. They advanced, dragging machine-guns and some half-full sacks along with them, and shouting words which seemed to me as maniacal as their expressions. Then they dropped into two shell-holes and into the battered end of the trench in which I was kneeling with the gunner subaltern, who had just returned. The hard piercing voice of their commanding officer drowned their own cries. He turned out to be none other than the fat subaltern with the large piece of plaster on his chin. He asked them some question, and they answered in a shriek as loud as his own. They were mad with despair at having been driven back, and were shouting wildly to each other. Holding grenades in their hands, they set up their machine-guns, and called out to their officers and friends to try to discover whether they were alive or dead. Whereupon they cursed the enemy, consigned them to death and perdition, and when they could not speak looked at each other with wild eyes and pointed from side to side. Presently a group of tanks lumbered over the field, covered in clouds of smoke, and aeroplanes buzzed over our heads and passed on. Shell splinters sent up spouts of earth, clouds of dust and smoke blew in our faces, and strange bowed forms drew nearer and nearer.

Supporting myself on the parapet of the trench, I limped to the ruins of the nearest house and sat down under the shelter of one of its shattered walls. After a while I got up and continued slowly on my way. It was still dark, but there were streaks of dawn in the east. Through the mist and stench and the thundering confusion of falling shells wretched little groups of men forming a company crept up towards the front line, to take the place of the dead and those who had been made prisoners, themselves entering the jaws of death. With eyes burning in their gaunt faces, weakened by hunger, and the majority of them ill, they bore their rifles and their haversacks, machine-guns and sacks of hand grenades, and stumbled through the smoke and stench against an enemy twenty times stronger than themselves in war material, for the last fight to the death. And I remember that as I stared at their vanishing forms my eyes stung, though, strange to say, more as the result of the appalling uproar than of the fumes of gas in the air.

I went on my way, taking cover where I could, till at the end of the little town I came to a small, battered *château.* Just in front of it, near the ruins of what may have been its lodge, were the remains of a battery—iron, horses, and men all blown to atoms and scattered right and left.

At that moment a man, crossing the path in front of me, pointed to something a little way off, and shouted to a fellow-soldier: "Look! . . . It's the likes of us that generally get copped like that. . . . But there they've got one of the gents by the collar!" I looked in the direction in which he was pointing, and at first saw only a military policeman, and heard the men shouting abuse as they passed him, but presently I noticed that he was mounting guard over a dignified, well-dressed officer, whose face was turned away from me. At that moment the officer who on the previous day had asked me for my papers and inquired about Fritz went up to the military policeman and his charge.

And then only did I recognize the prisoner, although he was turned away from me.

Hatred of the military police and of sleek, well-dressed officers was very fierce among the men in the front line. Numbers of them who had just come through the dust, gas, fumes, and crashing shells, and were crossing the ruins of the town, looked at the group with burning contempt in their eyes, and many of them shouted abuse. I went towards Fritz, animated, I believe, by a vague desire to get rid of the unwelcome sight. Saluting the officer, I reminded him of our meeting, and with beating heart asked him what had happened.

Though on the previous day he had been calm and collected, he was now extremely agitated. "A nice friend you've got!" he shouted, his whole body quivering. "Ever since yesterday afternoon we have felt certain from the way our batteries were being shelled that our positions must be known to the enemy. We had our suspicions of an old man in a village close by, who had been seen creeping about. Then by chance an orderly, attached to the Staff, happened to see your friend a day or two ago talking to the old man, and so I went for him. . . . I have good eyes, very good eyes. Women and criminals could tell you something about that! I knocked him over with my eyes, and twisting him round and round found something in his waistcoat pocket which was damnably like a sketch of our battery positions. In his waistcoat pocket! I know eyes when I see them. I know eyes! And so I have made him stand there, facing the Front . . . so that he will be able to look the brave officers and men in the eye as they pass . . . the dog!"

Gasping for breath, I asked whether I might be allowed to speak to him. I felt I must say a human word to him.

He shrugged his shoulders and took me up to him. I shouted his name.

He turned round, recognized me, and burying his face in his hands groaned aloud. Then, suddenly dropping his hands, he stared at me with eyes in which there was more fear and horror than I had ever seen in a human face before. Oh, human sin and human suffering! "I did not do it!" he shrieked. "I did not do it!"

I did not know what the truth was, but his eyes seemed to say that his conscience was not clean. Possibly he had only toyed with evil all his life. It may have been his passion; he may have felt impelled to toy with it. But, fearing that he was going to be a coward, I said sharply: "Be brave at least, and hold your head up!"

He groaned like an animal, and stared at the shells crashing to the ground on either side, as though he were hoping—at least, so I tried to believe—that one of them might hit him. And, clutching at his breast, so that the buttons of his shirt flew off, and gasping for breath, he exclaimed, with his eyes starting out of his head: "Was it my fault that I was my mother's son and had no conscience like other people!" Then, staring at the men who were passing, and who were probably nothing but a swaying mass in his eyes, he wrung his hands crying: "Help me, oh, help me, I don't want to die! How can I die? How can I appear before God like this?"

For a while I could not make myself heard, as light and heavy shells were crashing all round. Presently an officer came shouting up to us: "The tanks are already at Trois Tilleuls, and we have got nothing more to put up against them!" "I can do nothing for you," I said at last in deep distress. "Pray God to have mercy on you!"

His eyes turned from one to the other of us as though seeking help. Then, suddenly remembering his appearance, he tried to arrange his shirt and button up his uniform, but his hands were shaking so much that he gave it up. The next minute he tried to draw himself up as he used to do in the streets of Ballum when he saw some little girls coming along. But even this he failed to do.

"Have you any message for your mother?" I asked. "What shall I say to her if I ever get back?"

I saw from the change in his expression that he was back at her side in imagination. "My mother?" he replied hoarsely. . . . "Oh, what can I say to her? Isn't she to blame for all this? And I am her son. . . . But don't tell her what I have just said!" He groaned, and with eyes starting out of his head he shrieked: "When they bury me . . . don't let them throw the earth on my face!" Even at this late hour, when he was on the edge of the grave, he still studied his appearance.

At this moment other officers came along and stepped up to us, and as they did so we heard the shriek of a heavy shell, which immediately afterwards buried itself in the ground twenty yards away, sending up a column of bricks, stones, and dust. In the confusion that followed, while everybody was seeking cover, or falling flat on their bellies, the military policeman who was guarding Fritz was wounded, and the latter, springing up, dashed away. But hardly had he gone five paces before another shell crashed down, and, throwing him over, killed him.

Motor lorries thundered up and vomited their loads of men beside us.

With feverish eyes, weakened by hunger, and many of them sick, bearing their rifles, their haversacks, their machine-guns and sacks of hand grenades, these wretched little companies, led by their officers, staggered through the smoke and stench and falling shells towards the enemy and death.

CHAPTER XXXI

The March Home

DURING the next ten days or fortnight I wandered aimlessly about behind the lines. I was horrified by the experiences I had just been through, while in addition I was beginning to feel gravely alarmed by the changes I could see coming over the lines of communication. From time to time I was able to think coolly and philosophically about it all and to argue that I was witnessing the Great Shepherd of Souls urging men forward and driving them on they knew not whither. But the thought that it was my own people who were laying down their arms and abandoning all order filled my heart with unspeakable gloom.

All the places I passed through were crowded with malingerers and slightly wounded men, many of whom had probably mutilated themselves. They were sitting about everywhere hobnobbing with the lines of communication troops, and either describing the hell in the firing-line or the desperate state of affairs at home. Those who were ready and willing, as well as those who had no taste for war—and in every nation the latter constitute the mass of the people—were, as far as I could see, at their wits' end and filled with unutterable despair. They seemed to be waiting for a word from above, a passionate, stirring word, a command which would make all eyes shine and all limbs stiffen. But it never came! So they grew more and more desperate, sceptical, and callous. Meanwhile all the shallow-pates and chatterboxes, as well as the villains, began to raise their voices ever louder and louder. Everything seemed to be taking its natural course—the result of the events and conditions we had witnessed. The fighting men, who were the best human material in the world, under leaders who though hard were clear about their aims, were now demoralized through lack of leadership. They had degenerated into insignificant individuals with insignificant little wants. Would there be anything to eat to-day? What were the people at home doing? Would it be possible to get any tobacco? When were they going to get home? Would they be sent back by train? If not, would the soles of their boots stand the long march? Would the friend who had over-stayed his last leave escape punishment? Was it true that there was a revolution in England? What sort of welcome would the people at home give them when they returned? . . . Oh, home, home! Oh, to be back digging, working, and ploughing, and doing all those other wonderful, lovely, and beautiful things! Home! To wait at home to see how things panned out . . . ! To wait at home for the new era to dawn! Home! Fancy Christmas at home! Fancy celebrating Christmas!

On the third day, in the neighbourhood of Sedan, I discovered an abandoned Train Park. On the fourth I saw a hundred men, belonging to some supply column, insult their officer and choose a leader from among themselves. I saw the same thing happen that very evening in three other places.

I went to my General to report what I had seen and heard, but he was not in his office; he had gone up the road leading to Corps Headquarters in the north of the town. I met him coming back, but he turned round and walked a little way with me in order to listen to what I had to say. He made no comment. He knew without my telling him how things stood. I believe—for he was a clear-headed, matter-of-fact man—that he had summed up the situation correctly from the very beginning, and had only contradicted me and my colleagues in order to get more out of us.

As we approached the *château* in which Corps Headquarters were installed he stopped. "They say it is just possible the Kaiser may come," he observed, looking down at the town. "That may be his car over there."

To the left of the *château* there was a fine country-house, before the door of which a large private car was standing. We stopped to watch, while the General asked us various questions.

A moment later the Kaiser came out of the house and stood talking with three senior officers. He looked in good spirits, or at least seemed to be in the optimistic mood all too common with him. As usual, he held out his sound arm and talked in the lively, dictatorial manner he loved to assume. We were too far away even to be able to hear the voices, but we stood calmly gazing on the scene.

"There he is," observed the General thoughtfully, "the man who has led the German people for thirty years, and whom the German people have allowed to lead them!"

"Yes," remarked a colleague of mine, a young journalist, with a broad, clean-shaven peasant head, a South German by birth, "his grandfather and Bismarck won so much power for the Empire that the mass of the people would have trusted and followed the Kaiser whatever he had been like. Even the workmen would have done so, in spite of the Social Democratic Party."

"That is perfectly true," agreed the General, "and he was a pupil of his grandfather and of Bismarck. In a pretentious, blustering, foolhardy, top-booted, and loud-voiced way he was their creation, in an East European, half-Russian form. But latter-day Imperialism of the Western brand gets itself up in democratic garb. It is urbanized, cautious and soft, sly and hypocritical, more cat than wolf."

"Quite so," replied the journalist. "That was where he was mistaken, not only as regards externals but as regards heart and mind as well. He lacked common sense and humanity, and all understanding of the age."

"What do you think?" asked the General, still gazing at the car in the distance. "What will people think of him a hundred, a thousand years hence?"

The journalist contemplated the scene gloomily. "It was his fate to be a blend of goodness and weakness, as his ancestors made him. And now that he is in great trouble I'm afraid he won't find anyone to be true to the last breath. Nor is there anyone—and that is almost worse—who will be hopelessly untrue." Presently, with a note of enthusiasm in his voice, he added: "How wonderful it would be if he were to go into the firing-line now and fight with one of those numberless little groups of mortally wounded men—eight, ten, or at most twenty of them—trying to defend themselves against the superhuman onslaught in shell-holes, battered trenches, and behind ruined walls, and were to die with them. Then all would be well! Although this would not make him a great man, he would at least take his place among those who represent the German breed. But he has no liking for shot and shell or the smell of powder. He is a Church Christian, and it is not easy for a Church Christian to be either a great man or even a natural man."

Down below, in the distance, the Kaiser was standing at the door of his car. He had finished his animated instructions, to which the officers had listened in silence, and, stepping into the car, drove away. The General took leave of us and we went back into the town.

I believe it was four days later that the retreat from the Front began. The soldiers, driven out of their positions by the overwhelming forces confronting them, could hold out no longer; they were short of war material, munitions, and food (for the troops on the lines of communication were no longer sending forward what came to hand). During the first few days no large masses of troops came through the town where I happened to be; only a few ammunition columns passed by on their way north in good order, most of them led by their officers. Lashed on by anxiety and excitement, without either rest or sleep, I wandered aimlessly round. Corps Headquarters had moved, and there was nobody about that I knew. Towards evening I made inquiries about the regiment to which many of my acquaintances, including Balle and Ernemann, belonged; and when I heard that in a few days' time it was almost certain to march through a town in the neighbourhood I went there and waited.

That same evening I found the battalion, which had left the firing-line and started the march home on the previous day, resting in a village cemetery. They numbered in all about a hundred and fifty men. They had lost their field kitchen, and had lighted a few open fires at which they were cooking a thin watery broth, while they sat about in their coats on the walls and the battered gravestones of the cemetery. They were horribly thin and emaciated. Their clothes, which were covered with filth, could no longer be called uniforms; they were nothing but rags and tatters covered and saturated with mud and dung. Most of them still wore their steel helmets, under the brims of which their gaunt clean-shaven, hunger-tired faces gleamed with a strange expression of fixed earnestness. Owing to their state of extreme exhaustion they were like men in a dream; they did not talk much, and their voices sounded indifferent and sleepy. Their commanding officer, the short fat subaltern with the large piece of dirty plaster on his square chin, was sitting with an N.C.O. on a low piece of slanting wall near the entrance of the cemetery.

Going up to him, I told him who I was and where I came from, and asked to be allowed to join his men, among whom I hoped to find one or two acquaintances. He nodded carelessly with a strange absent-mindedness. "You must address yourself to the Soldiers' Committee," he replied, as though he were referring to things that had existed for centuries.

Turning round, I immediately caught sight of two acquaintances, workmen's sons from Ballum, and greeting them, I inquired whether Ernemann was still alive.

"He has been killed," they replied, shaking their heads.

I asked in horror whether they were certain of this.

One of them nodded. "We found him in a shell hole into which we jumped," he answered. "They were all dead, but I knew him." He mentioned the names of two others who had been lying dead beside him, one of them a distant relative of mine, a schoolmaster.

I went over to the wall and sat down. They followed me, and talked in low, monotonous tones about the dead. I said nothing. I don't think I could have said a word if I had tried.

At last I asked whether N.C.O. Bohnsack was still with them.

They nodded: "He is over there!" they replied, pointing to the far end of the church, where we could hear the sound of some one speaking.

I raised myself on my stiff knee and went over to him.

As I turned the corner of the church I saw thirty men and one or two N.C.O.s listening to a dark, well-dressed, well-fed man who was making a speech. He was wearing an old field service cap stuck on the side of his head. On an overturned gravestone on one side of him stood a number of pots of paint, on the other lay a banner, a small piece of white cloth on a rod. Close by, his face bristling with a three-days' growth of beard, his uniform hanging in rags about him, sat Balle Bohnsack. The right sleeve of his coat had been clumsily hacked away, probably by a sword, while the top of his arm was bound up and showed a large patch of blood still moist on the bandage. Beside him sat the doctor.

The dark man was saying that princes and officers had been superseded and that the working classes were now at the helm. The world revolution had come at last, bringing the fraternization of all the nations of the world, and above all of Russia and Germany. Thus peace and justice had been established on earth. Then he called upon them to elect a committee from among themselves and march home, where revolution had already broken out and where the free Europeo-Russian Soviet Republic had been established.

The men sat listening. They were ragged and bleeding, caked with the filth of months, and had just been delivered from four years of constant torture on the field of battle. They were dead tired, hopeless, and listless; they believed in nothing, had faith in nothing, but were most of them obsessed only by a terrible gnawing anxiety about those at home. For they did not know what was happening to them, and owing to the rumours that were being circulated imagined the most appalling possibilities. Their gleaming, strangely restless, deep and oddly questioning eyes looked at the speaker in a way that completely unnerved me, though I had seen tragedies enough already. One or two wounded were lying swathed in large white bandages, sheltered from the wind, close up to the wall. One seemed to be dying or dead.

When the agitator, again urging them to form a Soldiers' Committee, came to the end of his speech, they looked at each other with the same questioning eyes which a moment ago had been fastened on the speaker. They evidently wanted somebody or other to explain the strange and terrible things which they and the whole country, together with the rest of humanity, had been asked to face.

The doctor tried to speak, but the agitator said it was not right for officers and so-called educated people to have any say in the matter. The common people now held the stage. Then turning aside and looking into the pots of paint and stirring one of them, he observed: "There is no red here!"

"Do you believe in all this, Bohnsack?" asked one of the younger soldiers.

Balle shook his head. "I don't know, my son, I don't know!" he replied with grandfatherly benevolence.

Others came up from both sides of the church—gaunt, hungry creatures in rags, some of them wounded, all with hollow cheeks and eyes that gleamed with mortal terror and exhaustion. They shuffled along, with tired, heavy feet, many of them doubled up with internal pain, chiefly due to dysentery.

"The whole of Germany," continued the speaker, "and all the lines of communication are in revolt. The people are at the helm. Surely you are not going to stand aloof?"

Again they looked about, with eyes full of anxious inquiry, but numb from exhaustion and indifference. At last one of them drawled out: "Well, paint the banner red, then!"

The man looked into the pots again, and stirred up the paint, as though he were hoping that some of it would have turned red meanwhile. "There is no red here!" he repeated.

Balle was now jerking his left eyebrow up and down so that for some seconds it vanished completely under his cap. Then raising himself to his feet with great difficulty and groaning, he gazed at the crowd that had collected, and glanced at the subaltern, who was leaning indifferently against the wall beyond. In a tired voice, which, however, seemed only to emphasize his mild fatherly tone, he began to speak. "Friends," he said, "this man comes from over there," and he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder to the north, "from some Base Staff, and tells us to make a red flag. . . . Red is a holy colour, it is the colour of blood. . . . Yes . . . and the colour of love. . . . Possibly one day it will float above the heads of all mankind. For men are so wild and crazy that some day or other they will certainly choose a new colour. And then perhaps we shall be quite right to adopt this banner, and say that henceforward the blood of man shall be sacred in our eyes and love shall rule. But just look at this fellow! He comes from behind the lines, he comes from the baggage-train. . . . He belongs to the Staff baggage-train. . . . And we? We are exhausted, sick, and wounded! We are beaten and forced to retreat. And we know nothing about the world or whether it is ready for this banner, this blood-red banner." He was so tired that he swayed from side to side, but as he did so he gazed at them with a look of infinite paternal tenderness and raised a hand as if to comfort them. "Comrades," he went on, "when I was a boy I went to the grammar school. . . . You will never believe it. . . . Even our lieutenant will not believe it, but it is true all the same. . . ." And he cast a glance at the lieutenant, who was still leaning indifferently against the wall, and made his left eyebrow jerk up and down as usual. "I don't know much about history, but one of our teachers told us how in days long since gone by the Swedish Army, defeated and routed, was returning home from various lands—lousy, exhausted, wounded, and silent—under its brave king. The Staff baggage fellow says we no longer have a Kaiser. But we still have old Hindenburg, and under him the whole of the great German army is marching back from all corners of the globe, from all directions, beaten, hopeless, starving and filthy, marching silently back home. . . . Friends, that book about Sweden certainly said those men were in rags, worn out, hopeless and sad; but they were not ashamed. No, they were not ashamed, because they had given up the fight only when they were at the end of their tether! And it is the same with us! Dear friends, all that has ever happened in our own day and in the past, in our own and other lands, all that history tells us, the battles we read of in the Bible, and the great and terrible deeds, the tales of Troy and the Niebelungen, of Moses, David, the Thirty Years War, and the War of Liberation—all these things are nothing compared with what millions of German foot-sloggers have gone through over there at the Front. What is the bravery of the enemy compared with ours? Were they not stuffed with food, rested, well clothed, with mackintoshes up to their necks when it rained, and supplied with bright new weapons by the whole world? Were they not fighting with the feeling that the whole of mankind was behind them? But we, friends . . . chased from one Front to the other, from one fierce battle to the other, round half the globe, our artillery and air force growing weaker every day, food becoming more and more scarce, our friends being killed at our sides, our wives starving in the rear, and our aged parents and children unable to sleep from hunger at night. Their tears followed us into the trenches; we ourselves are gnawed by hunger, ill, lousy, clothed in stinking rags! . . . That is why, my friends, that is the only reason why we have been beaten and are done for. We have no need to feel ashamed, for we have suffered a thousand times more, both officers and men, and have been a thousand times braver, than our enemies. So let us march back covered with laurels from every Front and every country—back to our homes under old Hindenburg! Friends . . . perhaps when we get back a new world will come into being. It may be quick or it may be slow. New things are constantly coming into the world. But four years ago we marched out under one flag, we have fought and bled under that flag, and have dug ourselves in almost down to the devil's bones, only to jump out like madmen into mere shell-holes. Don't you think we ought to be satisfied with that flag until we find out what things are like at home?" And, peeping into the pots of paint, he turned to one of his comrades. "Go on, Jochen, old boy, dab the three colours on. There is no red there; but we have plenty of red ourselves." And pressing one end of the banner against the bloodstained bandage on his arm, he examined it with wide-open, tired eyes to see whether it were stained red. "It won't work!" he exclaimed. "Let's drop it! We don't need a flag. But, friends . . . we must have a leader. Yes, we must have a leader! There sits the lieutenant and he won't look this way. Naturally he is pleased to think we are going to do another silly thing, because we shall never be able to satisfy him. And it may be silly for all I know! But I am all for keeping the lieutenant as our leader, for the simple reason that he has always been our leader and has always been in front of us. If he wants an adjutant, I won't offer myself. He may not like me. And now, friends, I don't mind betting a sheep that if our mothers could see us . . . if our mothers . . ." But he became confused, shook his head, stopped and sat down.

The subaltern had come closer while he was ending his speech, and, looking angrily at him, turned to the men, and said peremptorily: "Now vote. . . . Who wants this Staff baggage fellow, and who wants me?"

They all looked at him, and signed that they wanted him.

"Very well," he replied wearily, clenching his teeth; "then that's settled. . . . And now you can clear off! . . . I am the leader! . . . We know what to do now and what not to do."

And after a while we marched on.

I might have seized the opportunity to continue my journey at certain points by rail, although the trains were terribly packed. But I did not want to leave the friends I had found, and, in spite of my wounded knee, I marched with them.

We—that is to say, the rest of the battalion, numbering a hundred and fifty men, together with two wagons behind bearing the knapsacks with the food, a field kitchen, and one or two head of cattle—marched in good field-grey uniforms which we had procured from the stores near Sedan. The men, with foraging caps on their heads, their trousers tucked in their boots, their rifles slung across their backs, and about forty cartridges in their belts, tramped on under the leadership of the fat lieutenant. But he often left us to ride with other officers, when he would tell N.C.O. Bohnsack to carry on. We were generally four or five abreast; we never sang, but marched in silence, or talked softly, and progressed at the rate of about twenty or five-and-twenty miles a day towards the German frontier. The weather was cold at times, particularly in the morning; occasionally it rained, but not often. The roads were very bad. As the main roads were blocked with troops, unit following unit, we sometimes took side-tracks, which were often very bad indeed. Most of the men had been unable to get new boots, their heels were worn down, their soles full of holes, so that they were practically walking barefooted. On one of the first days of our march a rumour ran through the ranks that English lorries had been seen dashing ahead on our flank to cut us off. So we started off again at midnight. On another occasion, after we had left the road for a while at midday to get a little rest, we were held up for three hours unable to find a break in the constant stream of troops marching along. One unit after another passed close on each other's heels. They had no equipment, as they had been forced to leave their stores behind them, but they were all recognizable—telephone and telegraph troops, the flying corps, the artillery, *minenwerfer* battalions, pioneers, captive balloon corps, transport troops, ammunition columns, remount troops, etc. At last Balle Bohnsack succeeded in holding up some teams of mules long enough for a gap to be formed, and we were able to get on to the road again.

Whenever we reached a height we could see both in front and behind us the huge masses marching along peacefully and in good order. . . . Badly led, defeated, bewildered, silent and solemn, the only ray of hope they had before their inner eye was that of the gleaming candles on the Christmas tree, and far beyond it better times to come. . . . How often before had this not happened to the German people!

We crossed the Rhine near Cologne. And three days later, towards evening, I reached Altona and took a room at the Schleswiger Hof.

CHAPTER XXXII

A Hard Day

AFTER a restless night I rose early and went to the railway station. It was packed with women and children, who with pale, sickly, care-worn faces were looking out for their husbands and fathers. In the waiting-rooms were hundreds of soldiers waiting to continue their journey north, while here and there a homeward-bound warrior could be seen alone calmly watching the busy throng. A long train full of old Landsturm troops steamed slowly in, and as the men filed past I asked them where they had come from. They replied that they had returned from the Macedonian front. Others told me they had come from Lithuania, Jerusalem, Finland, Russia, Holland, or France. Some looked smart in uniforms just obtained from store, but most of them were in rags, or presented quite an unmilitary appearance; with their goats or rabbits they were more like tramps than soldiers. They were all exhausted and unusually quiet, though this was due not only to their long journey but to their bewilderment and total failure to understand what had happened. But it could not be said that they looked particularly disconsolate. Though they were grieved at the thought of Germany's defeat, which they were unable to explain and did not accept with resignation, they were nevertheless filled with a sort of mute satisfaction that the days of insufferable slaughter were over.

On reaching Övelgönne I found my mother-in-law at work in the kitchen. Greeting me most affectionately, she asked me all my news, and then spoke of her own children, shedding a tear over Gesa and Thomas. Her spirits revived, however, when she mentioned the others, and I understood that they were all very well satisfied. She did not seem to be in the least concerned about Germany's defeat, and after I had given her a hand in the kitchen we went to the sitting-room, where she chatted most cheerfully.

She told me that Adalbert and Hieronymus were still on the same job in Belgium, but although she could not say exactly what it was she knew that it was most important for the progress of the war, and that they were playing a leading part. When they were last at Övelgönne they had admitted to her, in spite of their innate modesty, that they might long ago have been officers, but had preferred to mix freely with their friends in the ranks.

We were still discussing them, when the front door opened, and, lo and behold! both of them came in with their father!

They were terribly dirty and ragged, and looked at us with tired, hungry, swollen eyes. Their faces and bearing revealed all the signs of the physical deterioration undergone by sedentary workers who for years had been put to hard manual labour for which they were totally unfitted.

My father-in-law, with a wink in my direction, remarked smilingly to his wife that she probably expected her boys to look rather different, and, hinting that they were lousy, advised her to leave them alone in the scullery for an hour with a pound of green soap.

My poor mother-in-law was horrified and could not understand. "Good God!" she cried, "the road you were working at must have collapsed and buried you. Is that what happened?"

The accountant, rather crestfallen, replied impatiently that something of the sort had actually taken place, and asked her to fetch him his old clothes as quickly as possible.

I immediately turned round and led my father-in-law to the scullery, where I pushed forward the wash-tub and looked for the soap.

"I won't bother you with questions," said my mother-in-law, addressing the two wretched-looking specimens. "I imagine you were not only buried in the ruins, but that the other soldiers also robbed you of your clothes and medals and things. I understand everything is topsy-turvy."

"What does it matter now they've come back? Let's thank God we've got them!" cried my father-in-law kindly; and he hugged and kissed her.

Touched by his behaviour, I remarked how good he was to her.

She admitted that he had been very kind all through the war, in spite of his various activities as a club president and writer on domestic economy.

As the old man smiled proudly at me after this speech I was tempted to give him a rap on the knuckles, and asked her whether he had also looked after his own family.

Conscious of the implied reproach in my question, she confessed that she had often been left without any housekeeping money, and that their banking account was not in order even yet. "But," she added, "surely I ought not to complain, seeing that he has been so useful to other people!"

She then launched out into a panegyric on her children, beginning with Thomas. When she came to the two who were washing in the scullery she challenged me to deny that they had done wonders in Belgium. Even though the road they were building had unfortunately collapsed on them—"but how can a road collapse, Holler?" she asked in parenthesis—and they had been robbed of their clothes and medals by their fellow soldiers, did I suppose these depressing events would weigh them down for long? Not a bit of it! Hieronymus would go back to his paper factory, where he had been greatly missed, and Adalbert to the Mayor of Hamburg, who was urgently in need of him. Besides, why should Germany be in for a bad time? Had not Wilson promised that no nation was to suffer any injustice? And now that the war was over, could she not confidently expect her brother to return from furthest Ind and set their affairs in order?

I agreed with all she said, and after talking to her a little while longer wished them good-bye and took the train north.

As I could not find any conveyance on my arrival at the little town, I walked to Buchholz. The first frost of the year was lying white on roofs and railings, and there was a faint breeze, so I had a pleasant walk. But what was that to me? I was not thinking of the scenery, but of the sorry task I had in hand. I intended merely to tell his mother that Fritz was dead, as though he had been killed like millions of others. But I had an uneasy feeling that she might have heard the truth from another quarter, and that a bad time awaited me. I was so depressed and appalled that more than once I stopped, and meditated turning back and sending the news by letter. But every time this happened I remembered that it was my duty to see her personally and deliver the message, as Fritz had wished me to deliver it. Besides, was it not possible that my presence might soften the terrible tidings?

On approaching the farm I met a labourer whom I knew, and asked him about Hans. He told me that two years previously he had been employed at a horse-transport depot in Rendsburg, but had been released in order to take charge of his own and other farms in the neighbourhood. Apparently he had worked like a slave. The man also informed me that Almut and he now had two children, and that they very seldom visited the farm where Frau Hellebeck and Sören lived.

I then went on to the farm with the postman just ahead of me.

I had expected to find Frau Hellebeck alone, but to my surprise as I opened the door whom should I see but Hans and Almut—he tall, thin, and older-looking, but more erect and better dressed than when I had last seen him; and she, still delicate in form and colouring, but a little broader—a fully developed woman, serene and confident. Thus the love and passion of calm, wistful Hans, which she had always longed for, had done what Fritz had been unable to accomplish. I then learned that Hans, who rarely came to the farm, had done so that day in order to discuss certain farm business with Frau Hellebeck, and that Almut had followed him on her way to visit a sick neighbour.

They gave me a hearty welcome; but hardly had I said a word before Frau Hellebeck appeared. She was still majestic and beautiful; her hair, which was now snow-white, was beautifully dressed, and in her hand she held an open letter, which she had just received.

When she saw Hans and Almut she was a little bit cold and distant. But as soon as she recognized me she launched forth as usual with her "dear, good old Babendiek," saying she had heard from Fritz only a little while back that he had come across me. Then, with some hesitation and uneasiness, she added: "I've just got this letter, which is all about him . . . but I can't understand it."

Standing in the shadow, I had not yet spoken to her. But when she opened the door wide and saw my face she started back in mortal terror, and, turning pale, exclaimed in strange harsh tones of horror: "What's the matter . . . what's wrong with you?"

"You knew, Frau Hellebeck," I stammered, "that Fritz was at the Front?"

A wild and terrible thought seemed to have flashed through her mind. "But what does the fellow mean?" she cried, staring at the letter. "What does he mean? I don't know who he is. He speaks of a criminal . . . a traitor! What does he mean? I don't understand!"

I took the letter from her and glanced at its contents. It was signed by a sergeant-major. Some poor mean fellow had tried to find solace for his envy of wealth and dignity by writing to Fritz's mother, telling her with blunt brutality the truth, which was only now beginning to dawn upon her.

Unable to hold up, she leant against the door: "I can't, I can't understand the letter!" she cried. . . . "Why? . . . Why? . . . What does he mean by traitor?"

At this moment Sören appeared at the door leading into the large hall, and looked from one to the other of us. His chest was heaving and his lips trembled. "What is she shouting about?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?" she cried, staring fixedly at him. "You spectre! . . . Go away! . . . What does he mean by treachery . . . and shot . . .?"

"Nothing was proved against him," I stammered, "and he was never tried. He fell, as millions of others have fallen—shot by the enemy."

"But," she cried, "he was charged . . . the man says so!"

I tried to persuade her not to ask any more questions, but to let the matter rest. But she declared she must know.

"As if other men were any better!" she shrieked with abysmal contempt—"all liars and cheats!" All her smoothness and affability had vanished, and suddenly she had become a harsh, stony-hearted old woman, her eyes burning with mortal hatred.

I wished to help her, because I was afraid she was going mad, but she pushed me away. "What are you all standing there staring at me for?" she exclaimed with lack-lustre eyes.

I was filled with pity for her. "Your son had a request to make to you," I said. "He wished . . ."

But she protested, with piercing yells, that she did not want to hear anything, and I presume that something in the wild maniacal tone of her voice made Sören dash towards her. "Woman," he cried, in quivering accents, pale to the lips, "now let us make a clean breast of it; we cannot bear it any longer. My shoulders are sore from fifty years of it." Then turning to Hans, as though impelled by an invisible force, he knelt down before him. "I must tell you," he groaned. "I confess . . . that I killed your father . . . with this hand. But you have known it a long time already."

The old woman collapsed into a chair by the door, limp as a rag.

"Yes, Sören," Hans replied, in his beautiful soft voice, "I know. Years ago I used to torment you with it, but when I grew older and saw how it preyed on your mind I left you in peace. But I won't hurt you. You can go on living here, and working in the fields, if you want to. Nor shall I harm the woman."

"How did it happen?" I asked. "Did she want you to kill him?"

"The farmer called me to his bed," Soren replied, in solemn, measured tones, as though he were speaking on oath, "and told me to ride over and fetch his lawyer, as he wanted to alter his will. And just as I was saddling my horse she came to me, and throwing herself in my arms implored me to prevent it, promising me everything. And I went back into the room and did it." Then, turning his large fair head to Frau Hellebeck, he added: "Woman, I've told them! . . . You tell them too. . . . It would be better!"

Hans in his soft, melodious voice then spoke to her. She had evidently thought, he said, that she and Fritz were worth more than his father, and Sören had agreed with her. Possibly they were right, for they had managed the farm very well. When a crime was committed the value of the criminal as well as that of his victim should be considered. "At least, that is what I think," he observed in conclusion, speaking with incredible calmness.

But his step-mother had not heard a single word. She was buried in thought. At last she nodded twice; then, rising to her feet, she gazed at us.

She was now so completely changed that had we met her in the village street we should hardly have recognized her. In the strange realm of truth, which from her earliest childhood had been an unknown land to her, she was utterly lost and bewildered. Never have I seen anything more wretched than this poor forlorn creature, seeking in vain for some familiar foothold, turning her eyes to us in mute supplication, eyes that were truthful at last and full of human feeling and pain. Then suddenly she started up, and, seizing Sören by the arm, turned towards the door which led to the back of the house.

"Where are you going?" I asked gently.

Without looking at Hans, to whom her words were addressed, she muttered: "You said this was our affair. . . . You must not interfere." And so saying she left.

We remained standing there, intending to wait and listen. But at last, as though something was calling us out into the night, we moved, and unconsciously went towards the window. The garden looked silent and threatening. Hans sat down at my side, and took Almut on his knee. "What can they be doing?" she muttered from time to time, her face full of horror. We seemed rooted to the spot. The only sound that broke the stillness was Almut's horrified question, repeated in quivering tones, "What can they be doing?"

I don't know how long we stayed there, but at last we heard heavy footsteps in the passage, and the labourer whom I had seen on my arrival appeared in the doorway. "Hans!" he exclaimed, "something terrible has happened!" And Hans and I went out.

Close to the calf-shed, where the tools were kept, and reeking of Lysol, lay Frau Hellebeck—a doubled-up, ugly, pitiful old relic of humanity, with her white hair all dishevelled; while sitting on the tool chest, with a bleeding face and lifeless eyes, and a rusty nail in his hand, was Sören.

He had punished himself where he had sinned. He had had enough of the light of the world.

I took Almut back to her home in the woods. She was sobbing bitterly, and I led her to her sleeping children.

It then occurred to me that I ought perhaps to go back and help Hans and Sören; but coming to the conclusion that, after all, it would be better to leave the two quiet Low Saxons to settle things by themselves, and that I should only be in the way, I went back to the town.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Return of the Warriors

On my way north next day I happened to find myself among crowds of soldiers, both old and young, returning to their homes from the various fronts, and I listened to their scraps of conversation and their confused remarks.

They seemed to think that while at the outbreak of the war Germany might not have been altogether blameless, she had certainly been more right than wrong, that the real causes of the war had not yet been revealed, and that it had inaugurated a vast world-wide movement. If America refused to take the lead in the radical changes that must follow, the Old World would have to do so. They felt certain that the terrible years that lay behind could not be vain and meaningless, but must inevitably lead to great and wonderful things. I only repeat their views in the belief that the feelings of the inarticulate masses are more important than the conclusions of the wise.

On leaving the train I decided to walk to Stormfeld. When I came to the old mill—now extremely dilapidated, with its sails almost stripped bare by the villagers in search of fuel—I stood for a while in the cold west wind, gazing on the weather-beaten houses of my native village. I saw our smithy and the church, and the beach on which I had spent such long and terrible days of anguish and suspense, and I could not help thinking of all I had gone through since—I the home-bird, who loved peace and solitude, and above all my fellow-creatures!

On reaching the village street I was greeted by every one I met, even by Engel Tiedje's assistant, with the words, "Oh, so there you are!" And this after five years of war, imprisonment, and Heaven knows what else! "Oh, so there you are!" What an affable, garrulous race of people!

Engel's assistant told me that they still had plenty of work; but when I asked him where Engel was he replied that he was probably with his wife, who was ill. Apparently the privations due to the war had told on her; she had grown very thin, and now that she had developed congestion of the lungs he feared it was the end.

I turned sadly away, and went through the large doors into the forge.

And there sat Engel, where as a child I had so often seen him sitting. Before him, on the fire, was a frying-pan with rissoles in it. He looked very bent, and I was afraid that he too might be ill; but as soon as I looked into his eyes I was relieved to see them as full of life as ever.

He was beside himself with joy at seeing me—not that he said a word or even got up; but his hand reached out eagerly and pathetically for mine, and great tears rolled down through the soot and dust with which his face was covered.

He told me that his wife was very weak and slept a great deal, and that there was no hope. Then he asked me about my own experiences.

Drawing up the stool which he had once made for me, I began my story, and when the assistant came in and we had our meal together I still went on talking.

It was getting dark, neighbours passed in and out to see the sick woman, but still I went on, and when night fell I had not finished. The assistant sat silent and motionless by our side. One or two neighbours dropped in, and shaking me by the hand took their places in the circle ; on the stairs leading to the kitchen one or two boys had gathered in respectful silence, and now and again above their heads women who had just left the invalid stood listening by the kitchen door. Meanwhile, the fire in the forge had sunk to a mere flicker, and Engel Tiedje's voice could be heard from time to time uttering exclamations of surprise.

I was still relating my experiences when another woman appeared at the kitchen door and told us that the invalid had woke up and, having heard that I was there, wished to see me.

I went in to her, and they all followed. She was lying in my parents' bed, a thin, exhausted, pale figure, able to speak only in whispers. I leant over her, stroked her hands and cheeks, and thanked her for all her kindness to me ever since I had been a child. Then I reminded her of how

Engel had proposed to her, and, trying to smile, she whispered, "You two . . .!"

As for her friend the artist, she tried to explain that he had not been able to find his way back, and had not come across anybody who could show him. Then, apparently confusing Almut and Eva, she tried to look round at my mother's sewing-table, implying that she wanted to give the Town Hall of Lüneberg to one of them. I told her I would take care of it and give it to Almut.

More and more people came into the room. She asked for a hymn, and I read one to her slowly. Towards morning she grew quieter, and her breathing became weaker. At last when she ceased to breathe the women gathered round the bed, and we men went out.

I wanted to stay with Engel Tiedje until he had buried his wife; but he urged me to go to Ballum to fulfil my sad mission there too, and I left him.

I walked there, and, as I lingered on the beach on the way, it was afternoon before I reached the ferry. As it had begun to rain and I was anxious to get under shelter I did not go into the ferry-house as I passed.

On the ferry I greeted old Busch, and was surprised to find that he had grown thinner, and seemed shorter, and that his eyes had no life in them.

In spite of my uniform, he recognized me at once, and congratulated me on having escaped from the war alive. He said that Balle had not yet reached home.

Alarmed by his unusual listlessness, I asked him tremulously how his family was.

"We have lost three sons," he replied with quivering lips and eyes staring into the distance.

"It's beyond human endurance!" I cried in horror, and overcome with pity I seized his hand.

Looking down into the river, he warned me that I would not recognize his wife when I saw her again.

After a moment's silence I observed, in the hope of cheering him, that Helmut had become a sergeant-major after all, and asked him whether he was not pleased about it, as he had wanted it so much in the old days.

He shook his grey head, which looked so shrunken now. "I really don't know," he replied, "whether God approves of soldiers and sergeant-majors." When I expressed my surprise he replied that he had always regarded the military life as a sort of game, and did not know that he would one day lose three beloved children through it. This had made him see many things in a new light. Then he told me about two clergymen who had crossed in his ferry, and whom he had consulted about the matter. One had said that when our country was attacked we ought to defend it. But the other had maintained that if in 1914 we had told the enemy to come and take all we had, provided they could reconcile it with their conscience, a miracle would have happened, and we should have been saved. He did not know which was right, but the second had seemed the more sincere of the two.

It was dusk when I reached Ballum, and I went slowly through the streets. On reaching the Marktstrasse I saw a soldier sitting on some railings, with his knees high up under his chin, staring at a house on the opposite side of the street. His knapsack lay beside him. Looking up at the house I saw it bore the name of Bohnsack, but although the shop was empty loud children's cries were coming from the direction of the kitchen. Then, looking back at the soldier, I recognized Balle, and went up and asked him why he was sitting there like that.

In his usual fatherly tones he told me to be seated, and then proceeded to explain that if only I knew the state he was in I should not wonder why he hesitated to cross the threshold of that house, although it bore the name of Balduin Bohnsack.

I asked him what could possibly be the matter.

"Why, my son," he replied, "in the train I found out that I had not entirely got rid of my lice in Altona."

In spite of my depression I had to smile, and assured him that Dina would hug him to her breast whatever condition he was in.

He agreed, but declared that after the first kiss she would find out the terrible truth, and that was why he was still sitting on the railing.

I protested that a warrior of his mettle could not possibly be frightened of a woman!

"My son," he replied solemnly, with his hand on my knee, "there are some people who shun no kind of filth, but are terrified of cleanliness. I am one of them!"

"Love and soap will conquer all!" I replied, trying to encourage him.

But he seemed to think that the difficulty of the situation was increased by the fact that it was Saturday night, and that the whole family, including his wife, would be having their baths. "How can I turn up in the middle of it all?" he cried.

"Very well then, stop here!" I said angrily, remembering my own youthful attachment to his spotless wife. He mumbled something about waiting until the children were asleep; and I left him.

Oh, how anxiously I crossed the bridge to the dear old house that I could see on the other side! How frequently I stopped! And when at last I reached the front door how much too soon it was for my heavy heart!

Auntie Lena was sitting in her armchair, at the round table, with a pair of spectacles—a new feature!—on her long proud nose. She was adding up some accounts, probably for her Mothers' Union. Three little girls at her feet were struggling with their knitting-needles, while a little boy, with his head bound up, was engrossed for the time being in staring at the stately matron before him.

Just as I said good evening Uncle Gosch's kind old face appeared in the doorway. He had an open book in his hand.

At first they did not recognize me in my shabby uniform; but when I smiled—God only knows how I managed it!—they were overjoyed and greeted me most affectionately.

I had intended to tell them my sad news at once; but they were so full of kind inquiries about me that I first had to tell them all I had done. When I got to my visit to America, and told them about Eva and her child, they said she had written to say that her husband was far from well, but she hoped to come with him and the baby to Denmark and Ballum before long.

All this time Uncle Gosch had been holding on to the button of my tunic, and I could see from the gleam in his eyes that he wanted to tell me an important piece of news. When he was at last able to get a word in he exclaimed with a beaming smile: "Do you know that Ernemann is at the Front, that he is very well, and that we are expecting him home any moment?"

I said I knew.

But my dear second mother, seeing from my expression that I had sad news to tell, suddenly turned pale, and grasped the arms of her chair.

Uncle Gosch, however, interpreted my expression differently. "Is he coming?" he asked, his dear face still radiant. "Is he outside?"

"Oh, dear, dear Uncle Gosch! . . ." I cried, seizing his hand.

Auntie Lena gave a cry, and burying her face in her hands sobbed aloud, while Uncle Gosch, turning pale, stared blankly in front of him.

Stroking their hands, I then gently told them all about it.

They understood and wept.

Presently I told them about Fritz, and ended by saying that I wanted to be a son to them now—as far as I could hope to fill that place—and swore that I would never leave them. Uncle Gosch squeezed my hand and Auntie Lena stroked me. Whereupon, kneeling before them, I wept bitterly, bewildered by all that had happened, and tired of life and humanity.

. . . . .

For weeks I lived with the old people and accompanied Auntie Lena on most of her outings. She seemed to do all her crying in her bedroom, for she constantly came from the room with her eyes red and swollen, and her big proud face grew more lined and her hair more grey. When she set me free I spent my time with Uncle Gosch, but I came to the conclusion that even now—now that his only son had been killed—he still did not grasp that there had been a war. He was corresponding with four or five scholars in Germany, Denmark, and England, who, like himself, were engaged in investigating the dim past in which Pytheas had lived. But the most indefatigable of his correspondents was Sven Modersohn.

When the old people left me alone I tried to work, but the experiences I had been through and the feelings roused by the state of the world after the war left me no peace, and

I would spring to my feet with a groan and wander about the little town by myself.

There was hardly a house in Ballum that was not in mourning for some one. Dina had lost three brothers. My friend the baker, who had aged very much and grown very thin, had lost his sons, and in all the other houses where I had received kind hospitality in the old days I found sickness, exhaustion, sorrow, and even despair owing to the poverty caused by the gradual depreciation of the mark. It seemed as though it only required a few ashes to fall on the little town completely to extinguish the last spark of life still glimmering in it.

My Aunt Sarah's house was empty, and I heard from the caretaker that Frau Mumm and her daughter were living in Hamburg. On going through the rooms, in which there was only very little furniture left, I found they had not been done up for years, and were badly in need of repair.

One evening, as I was crossing the market-place, I happened to run across Dutti Kohl. He was, as usual, in very good spirits, and extremely smartly dressed. Hugging me to his bosom, he said how glad he was to find I had escaped the war unscathed, and asked me how I liked things.

I said I did not imagine that anybody was pleased.

"Oh," he exclaimed in his impudent way, "all I can say is that old Dutti Kohl isn't having a bad time."

He explained that as he had been worried all his life by being fat and flat-footed it was only fair he should get some compensation. "Besides," he added, pressing me more closely to him, "I was by way of being a purveyor to the forces, and was indispensable!" And he laughed heartily.

When I asked him what he was doing he replied that he was in partnership with some good friends connected with agriculture and was buying anything there was for sale—goods, houses, and above all farms, and that he was contriving to put some securities aside. "It is very, very sad, little Babendiek," he added disconsolately, squeezing me more tenderly than ever, "yes, appallingly sad that men should be so stupid! Think of all these people selling their property for paper money when nobody can tell what it will be worth the day after to-morrow!"

I asked him whether he was doing business with my Aunt Sarah.

He nodded sadly. "She, worse luck," he replied gloomily, "is the most foolish of the lot. She has sold the bulk of her land, and wants to sell the rest and her house as well." Then, pressing me to his side again and laughing, he added: "People deceive themselves so! She declares that she is sick of Ballum because Eilert is living at the sheep-farm and playing the fool there. But, as a matter of fact, she likes Hamburg and Hamburg gossip."

Disliking his remarks about my aunt, for whom I had had a great respect ever since I was a child, I replied coldly and rudely that I felt certain he never tried to prevent *her* from making a fool of herself over money matters.

"But, my dear little Babendiek," he protested in his usual sanctimonious tones, "no honest business man can interfere with other people's wishes. If Dutti Kohl liked, he could do much more business; but his high principles prevent him."

Infuriated by his stupendous hypocrisy, I remarked scornfully that he seemed to have been making some exceedingly profitable deals in spite of all his lofty principles, and told him to be careful not to fall into the hands of the law.

"My dear Babendiek, that only shows how little you understand these things," he replied gently, pressing me to his side. "A clever man can always get the better of the law—and even turn it to account. I may dread the stick of an infuriated peasant, but the law has no terrors for me!"

As he then proceeded to praise the French Government, who were bringing us to ruin, and seemed to be glad of it, I wriggled out of his arm and left him.

Preoccupied as I had been with my foster-parents and my own affairs, I had spent a whole month in Ballum without crossing the river to see Eilert; so I decided to go to him on the following afternoon.

On the way ferryman Busch told me that Eilert had come back from the war apparently perfectly happy. The old fellow admitted that Eilert was different from other men, and was inclined to ride rough-shod over conventions—a sort of bird who soared above everything. "The question is," he said, "does a bird know anything about bad roads, heavy lorries, herds of oxen, frontiers, and the difference between mine and thine? I bet you it doesn't! And that's why I told Mother the other day that although we have known that boy Eilert since he was a child it would be better for us to keep our lamb out of his clutches. Our sixth is now a fine big girl of sixteen, and he has cast his eyes on her—and you know his eyes!"

He was aware that Eilert had a companion at the sheep-farm, a woman after his own heart, who was quite ready to kick over the traces.

I agreed that he was always attracted by people who overflowed their banks, so to speak, and just as I was about to land he informed me that he had told Eilert to his face that his daughter was not of that type.

I found the sheep-farm very much altered, and, as there seemed to be nobody about, I had plenty of time to examine everything and note the changes. Simply though comfortably furnished, it looked quite gay. The space once occupied by the large double doors, which had been the bone of contention between the two brothers, was filled by a wall, in which a large window faced west, and the vast room, now a sitting-room and studio, was littered with easels, portfolios, sketches, and sketch-books.

Going back to the kitchen, I sat down by the fire, thinking of Uhle, and waited. And, lo and behold! in a moment she came in. She had grown much older and coarser, she had also lost her fine springy walk, and her hair, which was almost white, contrasted strangely with her wild red face. I had not seen her for five years. But remembering all the motherly kindness I had received at her hands, I went up to her with a smile, exclaiming, "Good old Uhle! . . ."

She was puzzled at first; then greeting me most heartily she made me sit down and talk to her while she went about her work.

Eilert was apparently on the beach, discussing all kinds of schemes with the people of the neighbourhood. When I asked who was with him at the moment she replied: "Bothilde."

"On a visit, I suppose?"

"No," she said. "Bothilde is here for good. She has lost her lover; he was killed in the war."

"Not killed," I corrected, "but frozen to death!"

"That's true," she said, and referring again to Bothilde's presence in the house, she gave the short sharp laugh which had always led me to suspect she was not quite sane.

"And what about you, Uhle, old thing?" I asked. I felt she was a little bit hurt and angry.

"Oh," she replied, "my work keeps me busy all day. We have three cows and over a hundred sheep, as well as chickens. You know he can't bear women not to be occupied. That's why he left that woman in Rotterdam. She was a rich man's daughter."

I asked whether he was drinking, and she said that when visitors turned up he would get rather drunk. The visitors were peasants and longshoremen, fisher-folk and their wives. "They drink and grow merry, and then he's happy," she said. "And when they've gone he very often goes on sitting by himself over the bottle."

But she would not allow that anything wrong took place under that roof; though when I tried to comfort her by saying that all such excesses were due to the war, and assuring her that people would gradually settle down to a quieter life, she seemed either not to understand or not to share my optimism.

Presently I went out to see whether I could get the others in, and met them coming towards me along the dyke. During the last six months Eilert had recovered from the exertions of the war, and was striding along, a broad, powerful figure, in his old English leather suit and top boots. Bothilde must have been a little over thirty-five at this time, but although what she had been through both with her family and her lover must have made her sad at heart no sign of her distress was visible either in her eyes or in anything she said.

Wishing to give our conversation a harmless turn, I asked Eilert what he had been doing on the beach. With the animation he always displayed when his head was full of plans and schemes he replied that he wanted to reclaim whole stretches of the beach for cultivation, particularly in the estuary of the river.

Such schemes were fairly common after the war along the whole of the German North Sea coast; but as the parties concerned were not agreed as to the best means of realizing their aims—some wishing to go slowly, and others, like Eilert, excited by the events of the war, impatiently wanting to hurry things on as quickly as possible—there was a good deal of quarrelling and misunderstanding.

Knowing something of these schemes, I was a little bit alarmed by Eilert's hopes and the enthusiasm with which he supported them. By employing thousands of labourers he wanted to accomplish in twenty years what the steady-going expert along the coast thought could not be successfully carried out under a hundred. He had glowing visions of the future, when the rich soil would be converted into fertile fields through which a canal would wind its way, carrying their produce to the towns. His aim was to provide work for thousands of unemployed, and settle the workers on the land they had reclaimed.

I did not question the desirability of such a consummation; the disquieting feature was the exaggerated zeal with which he was setting to work. For the first time in his life the demonic element in him, which imparted the fire to his soul, was diverted from his own private, personal concerns to things beyond his sphere. It was one of the results of the war. As the leaders of the nation had failed, every individual felt entitled to carry out far-reaching plans on his own account.

It was only when we got back to the sheep-farm that I was able, by talking to him about his own work, to induce him to speak of other things. And after he had shown me his latest sketches—the most recent were all of Bothilde—and I had had supper with the three of them, they accompanied me back as far as the ferry.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The Solace of Work

WEEK after week I remained with the old people, who were now my nearest and dearest, my visit prolonging itself to two whole years.

They are years which will probably be remembered as having been even sadder and more tragic than the years of war, if that were possible; for they constituted a period in which the masses, worn out by a superhuman effort of bravery, robbed and reviled by the enemy, helpless, defenceless, and disorganized, staggered about like desperate drunkards. The groans of the starving and of the millions who had lost all they loved best on earth; the spiritual distress, and the collapse of religious faith, which, if it had not been the prop had at least been the secret hope of all; the suffering of those who saw themselves robbed of everything they had so strenuously striven for all their lives, and the feeling that fortune was on the side of wrongdoing; above it all the foolish and coarse laughter of the younger generation who had grown up riotously during the conflict, and the luxury and ostentatious display of those who, with the instinct of vultures, had discovered how ignorance, bewilderment, and old age could be exploited—all this was to be read in the confusion and restlessness of the people, in the newspapers, in public assemblies, in the heart of the family, and in every face in the street.

I was staggered by it all, perhaps more so than others. I could think and write of nothing else. My heart was too full of the things I saw about me. So I set to work on my Teutonic epic, in which I proposed to present to the world and to future ages a comprehensive picture of the nature and achievements of the Central European peoples; and, unlike most other contemporary writers, I laid my difficulties and reproaches like a true Low Saxon, with tears and indignation, at the foot of God's throne.

I occupied a room which looked out on the river, and often at night, when after writing page after page I lay on my back in the dark, and found that sleep seemed only to flit farther and farther away, I would get up, dress, and go out to the river. And there I would remain until the dark landscape and the waters combined in their serenity and kindness to calm my distress and fill me with resignation and peace.

I was also tormented by thoughts of Eva, whom I constantly saw standing before me. I knew now what she had felt for me just after her parting with Eilert, and cursed the blindness and obtuseness which had made me lose her for ever. I wrote to her and she answered; but they were letters anyone could have read, though between the lines of mine there was all the longing, repentance, and sorrow I felt.

With the timidity and reserve characteristic of the Low Saxon, and the austerity and pride of youth, I told no one of my sorrow. But the loving eyes of the old people saw that I was not happy, and they tried their best to cheer me. Auntie Lena allowed me to help her in her good works, and when after a hard day she would come back worn out, and settle herself in her usual place, she would turn her majestic eyes upon me and ask: "Can't you get the better of that trouble?" And if I said but little in reply she would try to encourage me by some parable or anecdote. "You know what my afternoon sleep is to me," she observed on one occasion, "—what I call my 'creative respite'—and how I am always so nice to you all after it? Well, I believe these years will prove to be your 'creative respite,' so just you mark time and be patient!" After these somewhat cryptic remarks her head nodded forward and she fell asleep.

Uncle Gosch would take me with him on his walks, and try to distract my mind by discussing his favourite topic. We would make long excursions through the wind and snow, floundering across ploughed fields, through farmyards and over barrows, and up to the hills, whence we could look down on the stretch of country which, ages ago, had been a busy populated area, full of weather-beaten seafaring folk and dealers in amber, wearing skins and coarse linen, among whom the refined Greeks must have moved smiling, courteous, and considerate, with their hearts full of longing for their own sunny shores in the far distant south. Cold, wet, and covered in mud, we would return home, to be refreshed by Auntie Lena's scolding and her good tea; and then we would both smile, the same smile that had passed round the table in the old days when there had been more of us.

Sometimes Uncle Gosch and Auntie Lena would go over to the sheep-farm with me, to visit Eilert and Bothilde. On our way back we would discuss our friend and his manner of life, and I was glad to see how, as the years went by, they judged him more kindly. Bothilde still remained the beautiful garden surrounded by high protecting walls, but I knew the passionate, voluptuous flowers that bloomed in that garden, and the fragrance that filled it. She was, however, too slow-witted and simple-minded to be a spiritual mate to Eilert. He would talk to her of the things that filled his heart, but it was a monologue, and he did not care whether she understood or not. He was a lonely spirit. And she never disturbed him, never allowed herself to be a drag on him, or tried to be what she was not; and so he loved her.

Once or twice when we arrived we found the place full of people, and discovered that Eilert had just come back from the town or the beach, and had brought his friends home with him, to regale themselves with bread, eggs, sheep's-milk cheese, and grog or punch, in the large hall surrounded by his pictures. Even as a child he had complained of the petty narrowness of modern life and the complete decay of artistic feeling among the people, which he now ascribed to the Reformation; while he had always inveighed against the lack of colour in modern dress. So he used to deck his visitors out in bright-coloured clothes of his own design, based upon the national costume, of which he had chests full; and thus they would sit, men and women together, with bright, sparkling eyes and merry gestures—vigorous, stout, laughing creatures, forerunners of a purer, happier race, and of a different, cleaner conscience. Things often grew very lively, particularly when Balle was present, and sometimes when they were all singing and joking Eilert would sit quietly in a corner and paint and draw the scene before him. Then turning to me he would laugh and exclaim: "Most men only breathe! . . . I live!"

Although I could sympathize with all this, and even envy the ease with which he cast care to the winds, I could not join in. All my solitary brooding, the sad experiences I had gone through ever since I was a child, and my dear mother's melancholy had taken too deep a hold on my heart. Thus it was always I who urged the two old people to come home, and then, in the solitude of my room, my mother's melancholy would grip hold of me, and I would have another hard struggle against it. But more often than not when we arrived at the sheep-farm we used to find him painting with feverish industry. It would not be right to say that he had sought and found a new kind of beauty, or that he idealized. He did not seek. He sought nothing. He had everything in himself. His eyes were not as other men's eyes. He saw nature grand, simple, and holy, and he saw men in the same way. Thus each one of his pictures seemed to contain the whole of creation, in all its sacred eternity, infinity, and mystery.

He loved Nature; he himself was her purest and most perfect product; and he exalted the character of his stern North-country home and its people in accordance with the reverent, burning faith that was in him. The grandeur, charm, and depth of his pictures were rooted in the grandeur, piety, and depth of his soul. What did he care for petty disputes about Art? "Truth does not take sides," he would say. He did not care for Rubens, though his dislike was not profound, but he considered him guilty of thoughtless sensuality. His veneration was reserved for Velazquez and the old Dutch artists as painters, and for Rembrandt and Marées both as painters and human beings. He felt they were his brothers, even in the fate that ultimately overtook them.

Sometimes towards evening, when he was tired with work, we would stroll out together and have a look at the landscape. We were as different from each other as we could possibly be; and I neither knew nor do I dare to guess what might have been passing through his soul at such moments. As for myself, my mind was full of the kaleidoscopic scenes of my own life. I saw us both as boys sailing on the river, and then again as youths sitting together in his room. I saw him drunk in the little harbour taverns, and I saw him trudging by my side through the snows of Russia. I also saw all the other figures with whom he and I had been associated, and strove to discern order in the confusion, and to trace the hand of God. But he with his deeply penetrating eyes was directly conscious of God's eternal glory.

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Occasionally I went to Hamburg, taking my old room at the Schleswiger Hof, from which I could watch the movements of the people below in the great circus in front of the railway station.

I generally spent my first evening in the town with Paul Sooth. He had gone quite grey during the war, probably owing to the terrible tortures a man with his imagination must have undergone. But he had also contracted typhus on the Russian front, and was still suffering from the effects of it. Thanks to the careful way in which he lived, however, his health was improving. He was still in his old job, and had been promoted, as, in view of his conscientiousness, was only to be expected. Nevertheless, he earned so little that his wife was obliged to work as well, and this was all the more necessary seeing that Paul's brothers and sisters, about whom he was still as much concerned as ever, were not yet off his hands. So she gave dancing and gymnastic lessons, for which there was a great demand just at that time, and generally wore her tights in the house. I could see from his expression that he had never been able to reconcile himself to this fad of hers, that it horrified him; and he lost no time in asking me whether I did not think it terrible.

I replied that the only point that mattered was whether she had pretty legs or ugly ones, and as they were fine I could see no objection. Then, to change the subject, I asked him to tell me his experiences in the war.

This he proceeded to do, and described how he had been saved from freezing to death by one of the very peasants he hated so much. I then inquired what he thought of present conditions.

Passing his fingers through his hair, which was already standing up in horror, he gazed at me in alarm. "They are all cheating and profiteering," he replied, "and the Government is too weak to interfere. And do you know," he added, his sad eyes aghast, "that your old friend Dutti Kohl is also a profiteer, and that I am mixed up in the horrible business? Your friend Balle Bohnsack was here the other day. . . ."

I gave an exclamation of astonishment.

"Yes," he continued, "and he told me he was going to law with Dutti Kohl about some meadows, and as the authorities wouldn't help he had to do everything himself. Now he is spying on Dutti in the hope of catching him, because Dutti is profiteering at the docks."

I asked him what he had to do with it.

"Unfortunately," he replied, "there's a fat shipowner or something of the sort, who lives near here, who is Dutti's partner or criminal confederate, and I am supposed to keep an eye on him."

I inquired why he had not refused, and, looking utterly crestfallen, he asked whether I could refuse Balle anything!

I smiled. At that moment his wife entered, and we discussed the possibility of Bolshevism spreading to Germany. Sooth declared that the thought made him see things very black indeed, and his expression left me in no doubt as to the sincerity of his feelings.

But Clara could not understand Paul's grievance against the Bolsheviks. She thought Bolshevism might be quite a good thing.

"My dear, good woman!" he murmured in tones of alarm.

"I can't see that it would be so bad!" she exclaimed. And she proceeded to enumerate all the advantages of the change. After all, it would only mean that they would all become peasants again, as they had been a hundred years ago. And as she and Paul had no land of their own they would have to work for the peasants who had. Besides, she had heard that the Bolsheviks had introduced one excellent reform—a husband and wife could contract a new marriage once a month.

Never had I seen Paul Sooth look so distressed! Feeling that any words of comfort from me would be quite unavailing, I proceeded to ask him about his brothers and sisters. In a trice he grew more cheerful and began telling me the history of each one in turn. Apparently he was still taking a fraternal interest in them all, and I am convinced that a fair proportion of his slender means was devoted to helping them.

On the following morning I went to Övelgönne. I found my mother-in-law, as usual, at her seat by the window, busy with her lace-work, but opposite her, at the other window, sat her granddaughter, the accountant's child, a fair-haired, soft little creature who had her grandmother's eyes.

She complained that her husband was out most of the day now, but reminded me of his deep sense of duty to his fellow-man. Apparently he spent his mornings on the river bank, dictating to his granddaughter a pamphlet on the importance of order and regularity in the home; and his afternoons were occupied with his various clubs. "He maintains," she observed—"and I am sure he is right!—that the best corrective for the confusion and disorder of the age is, in the first place, the family and sound domestic economy, and, secondly, the work of his clubs, which directs the mischievous energy of individuals into harmless channels. But you know what fine thoughts and apt similes he always has!"

I asked her what state the bank-book was in, and she admitted that it was probably in a bit of a muddle, as she had just had a notification from the bank to that effect; but she hoped that everything would soon be all right, and that the good fortune which she had always been expecting would not be long in coming her way. This did not mean that she had received any news from her brother—in fact, it seemed as though he had forgotten all about them!—but she expected the good luck to come from her sons.

"Not from the accountant," she replied, in answer to my questions—for apparently he had just resigned his post, quite voluntarily, of course, though he was sure in these interesting times to find another job very quickly, which would offer more scope for his great gifts. But she counted on Adalbert and Eusebius.

Adalbert was no longer with the Mayor of Hamburg, although the latter had offered him a higher position, the precise nature of which unfortunately she could not tell me, as it was a secret. But he had refused it, preferring in these interesting times to enter trade. And his Chinese brother, as she informed me she had playfully nicknamed him for a while, had followed suit.

I asked her what they were actually doing.

She replied that they were both wholesale dealers; but more she could not say. All she knew was that, owing to the peculiar state of affairs, they had been able to enter the business without any capital, and now dealt in goods they did not own and never even saw, and which possibly never had any real existence; but she could not be sure of this. And she challenged me to deny that a very special degree of intelligence was required to deal with goods that are never seen and which possibly do not even exist; and declared that, for her part, she had never doubted for one moment that her sons possessed that intelligence.

I asked her whether they earned any money at it.

"Tens of thousands!" she replied, flinging her little bobbins about with redoubled energy.

I reminded her that tens of thousands did not mean very much in those days. But she cheerfully dared me to deny that tens of thousands were, after all, tens of thousands, and she gave me the most glowing account of their prosperity.

Assuring her that I did not doubt it in the least, I left her in a state of supreme contentedness.

One evening, near the harbour, where on the previous day there had again been some disturbance, I happened to meet Helmut Busch, and to my surprise saw that he was in the uniform of a police officer. He was thin but very well set up, and told me that he was still in his old job, but that in times of unrest he acted as a special constable. At present the police were kept particularly busy trying to prevent the smuggling of goods abroad, robbery at night, and various other crimes that had become rife in the neighbourhood of the docks.

As I was interested, I accompanied him on his round, and he described what the various ships and warehouses were supposed to contain and the illicit traffic which, owing to the prevalent confusion and the weakness of the new Government, was being carried on in Army material, whereby certain people were making their fortunes.

On our way back to the centre of the town I asked him about Barbara. For a moment he lost his calm, confident tone, and replied that he had seen her only once since that day during the war, and that was about a month ago in the company of her mother and of Dutti Kohl.

"She seems to go from one to the other!" I exclaimed angrily, shaking my head. "Now it's this fellow Kohl again! I can't understand it! She's good-looking and well off; surely she could do better than that!"

Again he seemed to imply that she must go on having her fling. "What drink is to her brother," he observed, "these flirtations are to her. But I think at bottom she is cautious, and won't throw herself away. Besides, I imagine their affairs will soon be so much involved that she will have had enough of adventures, or else they will end of their own accord."

He explained that financially they were in a bad way. Under Dutti Kohl's influence Frau Mumm had apparently sold all her land for paper, and as this paper was falling in value every day she might at any moment have nothing at all. "But for Dutti Kohl and his associates," he added, "these deals in farms and farmland are merely a sort of side-show. His main concern here in Hamburg is by fair means or foul, but chiefly by foul, to lay hands on as much Army material as possible, and smuggle it abroad." And leading me into a well-known wine-bar he said he had heard that some of the cleverest dealers in this line frequented the place. He was anxious to see them face to face, and though it might prove an expensive experiment he hoped to get out without spending too much.

The place was so crowded, noisy, and smoky that our entrance was not noticed, and, taking seats, we ordered wine and something to eat, and looked round. The company consisted chiefly of men and women between thirty and forty years of age, all of whom seemed to be flourishing, well-fed, and in the enjoyment of wonderful appetites. The men were all talking business, and the women were listening with a sort of indolent respect. But they were coarse, blustering people, and those of them who had children were completely overshadowed by them as far as flourishing looks and vigorous appetites were concerned.

I examined them all with the greatest interest, thinking they did not make an altogether bad impression, and asked Helmut whether they were really all profiteers and shady business men.

"Yes," he replied, "but they are careful to keep within the law; and in any case their consciences have such vigorous digestions that they manage to keep them quite clean in spite of all their shady transactions."

I asked him whether Dutti Kohl was one of their number.

"No," he answered; "the people you see here are really gifted business men who have been tempted by the unusual state of affairs to deviate a little from the straight path. They have yielded to the temptation to grow rich quickly, and though they may be sailing close to the wind they are honest at heart. But Dutti Kohl, like his father, is a born swindler. Ever since the beginning of the war he has been racing like mad after money, and he cares so little about the law that sooner or later he will be caught."

We were just getting up to go when I saw ahead of us a tall, elderly woman making her way through the crowd. I was attracted by her proud and stately bearing, and, looking more closely, recognized my Aunt Sarah with Barbara behind. They were just leaving in the company of friends, and when Barbara caught sight of us we went over and greeted them.

Ever since my aunt had lost her husband her real nature and breeding, which were coarse and common, had risen conspicuously to the surface. For a time the atmosphere of the fine house she still continued to inhabit and the friends she saw in Ballum had prevented her from sinking too low. But two years in Hamburg, where she was deprived of these associations and was not received by the best people, had led to her moral and physical deterioration.

Whereas Barbara seemed vexed at being seen by us two in such a crowd, her mother had never looked more self-confident and haughty. She observed that it was not everybody who could steer a safe course through the troubled waters of the age, and that many who were unfamiliar with the colour of money, because they had never had it, were sinking into the depths.

I agreed.

"The old rich," she continued, as her beautiful fat hands toyed with the heavy gold chain round her neck, "must learn to adapt themselves to the new conditions."

I told her that I had heard she had disposed of her meadows and her house in Ballum.

But she declined to discuss this with one whom she still regarded as ignorant about such matters, and asked me my news. She evidently imagined I had been utterly ruined by the state of affairs and was living in some cellar.

When I told her that I was with the Bornholts, and was still writing, she sneered at the humdrum life of Ballum, saying she could not stand it any longer, although she admitted that it might suit simple people. I had never seen her more arrogant than she was that evening, when she was on the brink of ruin; and when I happened to mention that I occasionally crossed the river to see Eilert she seemed to have had enough of me and wished me good-bye.

When we had gone a few paces I turned round and told Helmut that Barbara had just looked back. "Evidently she wanted to have another glimpse of you," I added.

He glanced back, and then in the cool, thoughtful tones which sometimes irritated my impulsive nature he said: "We actually did catch each other's eye again!"

As he and Barbara had walked together while I was with my aunt, I asked him what they had talked about. When he said they had merely discussed trivialities, casting poisonous glances at each other all the time, I was furious, and told him that the only thing to do with her was to take her by storm.

"Not yet," he replied. He had no wish to see his wife's eyes reproaching him with being only a poor clerk.

The following autumn brought the complete collapse of the mark, and the bulk of the population, seeing their entire wealth vanishing under their noses, made a wild rush for the shops, in a desperate endeavour at the eleventh hour to convert their cash into goods. But the most terrible injustice was that all who had entrusted their savings—

that is to say, the fruit of their labour, and what they had earned by the sweat of their brows—under seal and signature to others now found themselves cheated of it; and the law approved. Thus the masses, who had lost their faith, confidence, and discipline during the war, now fell a prey to complete demoralization and despair.

Our house in Ballum was thronged every day with the unfortunate victims of this state of affairs. They all came to seek help from Auntie Lena, bringing her their savings-bank books, their bonds, their certificates, and all their little treasures. Some of the older people, who through hunger, anxiety, and lack of fuel had grown too weak to stir beyond their own thresholds, begged her to go to them; while many committed suicide.

Auntie Lena, who, by the by, was also seeing her little fortune melt away under her eyes, had hitherto been able to deal with the distress about her. But it now assumed such unwieldy proportions that, although she appealed to the wealthy, the parish authorities, and all her acquaintances in Denmark and America, the assistance she obtained was inadequate.

In the end, owing to her inability to help, she fell ill—I believe for the first time in her life—and spent her days in floods of tears over those for whom she could now do nothing. After my work I would sometimes sit and talk with her, and even suggested that Uncle Gosch should join us. But she did not think that would do.

"No," she said, "he is quite useless. Only yesterday he asked me whether he could have his boots soled with birch bark, as leather is so dear, and the next minute he wondered what people meant when they said times were bad!"

I told her that Balle Bohnsack had bought one of the meadows which Frau Mumm had been induced to sell to Dutti Kohl, and was one of those who were suing the latter. This led us to the subject of Aunt Sarah, and we wondered whether she had really sold all her property for paper, as in that case she must be quite poor too.

The idea filled me with alarm. "But, Auntie Lena," I cried, picturing the big fine woman with her rich silk dress and her gold chain, which had been the object of my respectful admiration as a child, "surely it won't be as bad as all that? Eilert will always be there!"

"Eilert?" she exclaimed. "Do you suppose he could help? Why, when I asked Uhle for a subscription for my poor the other day she looked most distressed. I'm afraid his property has been turned into paper too and vanished."

However, she did not think this mattered much. What she felt was far worse was the fanaticism with which he was building dams and dykes. "He is only making enemies for himself!" she declared, "and surely he was isolated enough as it was. If he is going to make enemies into the bargain, he'll go mad!"

Admiring her perspicacity, I observed a moment later: "Even we may be quite poor any minute, I suppose. Who knows whether the Government will go on paying pensions?"

"Don't you be afraid, my son!" she replied, looking suspiciously at me. "I'll get on all right. I would simply take Klevermaak's pony and drive all round the country every day, begging the large farmers for my poor. And then Uncle Gosch and I would eat our fill with the rest of the poor! That's what we'll do! It strikes me you would be better employed wondering who'll give you something to eat when people have stopped buying the lying stories you write."

I humbly replied that if that happened I would do as I had done before, for long periods in my life—hang on to her apron-strings, and hope for the best.

CHAPTER XXXV

Aunt Sarah Hands me her Gold Chain

As I felt anxious about Eilert, and wanted to talk to him about his mother's and sister's affairs, I decided one bright wintry day to cross the river and pay him a visit.

When I drew near the sheep-farm I saw Bothilde at the door of the outhouse, attending to the cows, and asked her whether it was true that Eilert had changed his Dutch money.

She nodded, but said she did not think it could have amounted to much, as he was a bad hand at keeping money. Nor was it the loss of the money that was worrying him, but the fact that the people round about, who thought he was rich, and had kowtowed to him before, were now behaving very differently. She looked extremely sad, and admitted that he had been drinking again for the last week or so. "The worst of it is," she added, "that in time he puts everybody's back up. He is so violent when he can't have his own way."

I replied that he ought never to have plunged into the reclaiming business. He was too hot-tempered. But I hoped he was still on good terms with Uhle and herself.

"He can't quarrel with us," she rejoined simply, "because we don't contradict him. We think everything he does and says is right." And she looked at me serenely. She was like a beautiful lake, deep and full of mystery.

I entered the house, and found Uhle working with a vigour which suggested agitation; so merely stroking her arm as I passed, I went into the hall to Eilert.

He was standing before an easel in his usual shabby russet leather suit. In addition to the picture in front of him, representing a group of Landsturm troops marching through the snows of Russia, I saw two others leaning against the wall which stirred me so deeply that I congratulated him on them.

He muttered some reply, but I could see that he was thinking of something else, which was weighing heavily on his mind, while his eyes looked hard and fiery.

I hesitated a moment, wondering whether I ought to speak to him about his mother and sister; and finally deciding that I must, I told him what I had heard.

He did not seem to be in the least bit upset. "There are millions of new poor," he said; "why should not my mother be one of them? But I'll see whether I can help a little perhaps through Auntie Lena."

I hinted at what a blow it would be to a woman of his mother's temperament.

He scoffed. Did I imagine it was in keeping with his mother's temperament to live in that fine house, between the old judge and the Dean, with a glass of red wine in her hand? No, he knew her real temperament, and begged me to remember how violent she could look when she was angry. "Her great-grandfather," he pursued, "was a rowdy drunkard and murderer, and her grandfather had a broken-down little farm on the marshes—a hot-tempered fellow who was reduced to penury and cut by everybody. And his wife, who brought my mother up, was a fish-wife, a coarse, hot-blooded creature. . . . If my mother is poor she may find it hard at first, but it will bring out her best side—her coarse side. My mother, little ensign, was always a fish-wife in disguise."

A lifelong illusion had been shattered, and I stared at him in silent surprise. "And what about Barbara?" I asked, when I had recovered a little.

"Barbara," he replied, "has her dangerous days behind her. She is an experienced woman now. She'll jog along all right and get married. It's true," he added, with a shrug of his shoulders, "that there are not many men left and that it is a bad time for young women. But then, as I have always thought, there's not much to be said for being alive at all!"

I said I hoped he had not lost his old faith in that higher form of life which was to be seen in all his pictures.

"I feel very humble," he replied after a while, "and when a man is humble he is open to faith, and faith is wonderful."

I replied that I was glad to hear he felt like that.

But he suddenly grew gloomy again, and observed that the same mood might lead to deeds of violence, particularly when one was surrounded by stupidity and misunderstanding. Had he not just told me that one of his ancestors was a murderer?

I tried to persuade him that such impulses must be resisted. But he pointed out that it was easy enough for me to talk like that because my stock was better than his. Then, picking up a brush, he tried to paint, but, finding he could not, he threw it down again. "Just see what a state you have got me into!" he exclaimed.

I apologized, and we went out together. Feeling it might do him good to tell me about his troubles, I began by saying that I could not see eye to eye with him in regard to his reclamation schemes, and that experts doubted their practicability.

But, flying into a passion, he suddenly assumed that expression of mad defiance which I had seen in his face only once or twice before in my life. So great was his rage that he could not speak.

"I'll go now, Eilert," I stammered sadly.

"Go!" he replied gloomily; and I left him.

I was so upset by this difference with my old friend that I could not go home at once, but walked for some distance along the dyke, and as I made my way back it was getting dark.

When I was going through the town, and was just about to cross the market-place, I saw, coming out of the judge's house, a stately-looking woman, who, to my surprise, turned out to be my Aunt Sarah.

I stood still and looked back at her, and would have let her pass on had I not been alarmed by her appearance. She was thin and gaunt, and there was something unsteady, not to say low, about her walk, which struck me as unfamiliar. Guessing at once what was wrong, I went up to her, with the intention of giving her whatever assistance I could, and asked her whether she was going to stay long in Ballum.

Without answering my question, she replied, as I thought somewhat absentmindedly, that she had been to the judge's and was on her way home.

Concluding that she could not have sold her house after all, I told her how pleased I was that it still belonged to her.

"What do you mean?" she cried, looking at me in wild alarm. "Do you think paper money is worthless, then?"

I protested that I was a child in such matters, and she agreed.

By this time we had reached her house, and she said as though she were in a dream that I might go in with her.

The caretaker let us in. She too concluded from seeing my aunt that the house was not sold, and said so. But without making any reply my aunt walked straight into the sitting-room, and the caretaker shook her head ominously.

I followed my aunt into the room, and when she had taken her usual seat at the small table by the window I stood in front of her, and with the tenderest solicitude asked her whether there was anything I could do for her.

Her eyes wandered searchingly round the old room, and it was then that I noticed for the first time that much of the furniture and all the pictures had gone.

As she did not seem to have heard what I said, I asked whether she had met with any success at the judge's.

"Oh, him!" she replied contemptuously. "He knew how to gorge himself with my food and my wine, and that's about all he's good for. All he can say is that the times are mad!" And she passed a hand over the bare surface of the table and was silent.

I was at a loss to know what to say, when suddenly she remarked: "It's too late now to take these things away. He'll be back again in a minute." And at that moment we heard the sound of a car.

An instant later Dutti Kohl came in—a coarse, square figure in a baggy new suit of the kind worn by men who, having succeeded, no longer worry themselves about smartness.

He started when he saw my aunt and me, and for a moment did not know what to say. But recovering himself, he took my hand and remarked that he was glad to see me with my aunt, and wished her good evening. Whereupon he put his arm round me as usual.

"My aunt is very much distressed," I said, trying to free myself.

"Who isn't?" he exclaimed. "The times are like a seesaw!" And he gave an affected laugh.

I replied that I did not think it was a moment for laughter.

But he only laughed again, and assured me that, as far as he was concerned, he liked the times. Why shouldn't he? "And," he added, "I would even go so far as to say that I do not dislike Lloyd George and Poincaré. I've got nothing against such people. They bring life into the world!"

I now observed for the first time that his face was anxious and careworn, as though his sleep had been disturbed by grief or anxiety. I also noticed that he was restless and uneasy. I told him angrily to drop that sort of joke, as it was out of place.

Feeling he had gone too far, he sanctimoniously admitted that the times were indeed very bad for many people, and in the old familiar tones of affected sadness which I knew so well deplored the perversity of the masses, and said they ought to be better educated. Then, glancing uneasily at my aunt he expatiated on the amazing greed with which people sold all they had in exchange for paper.

Nauseated by his humbug, which I knew of old, I wriggled myself free, and told him to his face that as a boy I had seen him and his father swindle their customers, and that I presumed he had treated my aunt in the same way.

"Dear little Babendiek . . . !" he began, smiling in his old hypocritical way.

"Oh, stop that!" I cried. "Tell my aunt what she can do!"

"Have you spoken to Barbara?" my aunt asked quietly, looking up from the table.

He turned pale. "I didn't know I had anything to speak to her about," he replied rudely.

"I thought you two were coming to some understanding," she said in humble tones.

"I did at one time think of making her my wife," he replied coldly. "But when I saw your fortune dwindling every day I changed my mind. Money must go to money!"

"She won't have you, that's the truth of the matter!" I cried scornfully, beside myself with rage. "You tremble all over when you think of her. But she won't have you! She wouldn't dream of it!"

"Dear little Babendiek!" he replied with feigned benevolence.

"I am not your little Babendiek!" I exclaimed.

Assuming an air of moral indignation, he reminded me of Barbara's fast life, and declared that she had even had an affair with me. "I expect absolute purity in a girl!" he concluded.

I asked him who he thought he was to set himself up as a judge of purity, but he merely replied that Eilert's wretched financial position was a further reason for not courting Barbara.

I don't think my aunt had been listening, for she now looked up again and asked: "And what shall I do?"

"You are not a child," Dutti Kohl replied, "so you ought to know what to do."

She opened her handbag and took out a bundle of billion-mark notes and flattened them out with a rather dirty hand. And as she looked up and again asked what she was to do I noticed that her hair and her dress looked untidy.

"Haven't I told you?" Dutti replied rudely.

She looked out of the window. "What is the car waiting for?" she asked.

"For the rest of the antique furniture," he replied. "The other stuff will be sold here in Ballum." Then, turning to me, he added: "There is a wonderful export trade in old furniture just now."

Turning contemptuously away from him, I asked my aunt whether the judge had given her any advice or hope.

"Advice, hope?" she exclaimed, glancing wildly at me. "No . . . I don't know. . . . But tell me . . . am I now . . . ? Surely it is impossible!" Then a moment later she repeated: "Am I now . . . ?"

"I take it," observed Dutti Kohl, "that your aunt wants to know whether she has anything left or whether she is destitute. You may as well tell her the truth and say that she is. All she has is that pile of billion-mark notes." Then, pretending for some reason that she was deaf, he shouted at her: "You might be able to buy a calf for the money—I don't know how much calves are fetching just now—but I think it would be just about enough." Suddenly he caught sight of a bit of my aunt's gold chain in her bag. "But I see you still have some valuables, Frau Mumm," he observed. "Stick to them! Don't be so foolish as to sell them as you sold everything else!"

"It's impossible, impossible!" she cried, folding up her notes.

Once more Dutti reminded her that she was a pauper, and her daughter also. He even offered to give her the information in writing.

I was furious with him, and accused him, and him alone, of being responsible for my aunt's ruin, adding I had heard that quite a number of suits were pending against him. But he merely reminded me that I knew nothing about such matters, and that as a novelist I was a fantastic visionary.

I retorted that I was the very reverse of a visionary, that I was a realist and looked facts square in the face—a faculty which had shown me that he was crooked even as a boy at school.

Pale and indignant, he said he knew that Bohnsack and I had never been his friends. He was also aware that Bohnsack was spying on him in Hamburg, and I could tell him so. But he would never succeed in catching honest Dutti Kohl. "Besides," he added, "the whole world is mad, and I wonder whether Herr Bohnsack knows all the rules and regulations that pour down from the authorities!"

But I was not listening. I was looking at my aunt, who, having apparently forgotten what she held in her hand, and taking her bank-notes for a handkerchief, was pressing them to her cheek. I could not bear it any longer, and hearing the men moving the furniture from the adjoining rooms I invited my aunt to go back with me to Auntie Lena for tea.

She shook her head. "I shall not stir from this house," she replied. "It is my house."

Dutti exclaimed that it was not her house but his, and that she had no right to live in it.

"If I am not mistaken," I observed, "my aunt is entitled to remain here, even if the house is yours, because she has been living in it." And the furniture movers, who overheard what I said, nodded.

This seemed a blow to him. He had evidently already disposed of the house, and, looking angrily at me, he advised my aunt to return as quickly as possible to Hamburg, unless she wanted to lose her house there as well and the furniture in it, if they really belonged to her.

I told her to take no notice of what he was saying, but to stay in the house if she wished to.

Up to this point I believe she had trusted him, but now all her confidence had vanished. Suddenly a savage expression entered her huge face and her eyes filled with violent hatred. Standing up, she began to belabour him with her handbag, showering down the vilest gutter abuse on his head. Not a trace of the stately lady was left; she even scoffed at him for his failure with her daughter, using the most pungent expressions to drive home her insults.

Dutti Kohl implored me to restore her to her senses, while the workmen looked on with mingled surprise and amusement.

Seizing my aunt by the arm and calming her, I asked her which room in the house she proposed to use, and after a moment's thought to my intense surprise she said she would have Uhle's room.

Supporting her on one side, I accompanied her to Uhle's room, where, dropping heavily on the edge of the bed, she began to look round. I was afraid that the sight of the small, meanly furnished room would make her change her mind, but to my surprise it seemed rather to soothe her, and looking round once more she expressed her determination to remain there. "I shall be quiet here," she said, passing her hand over the coarse, rough quilt.

My heart bled for her and I stroked her cheek. All of a sudden she had become like one of the neighbours in my own village or any other simple old woman. I advised her to go to bed for a few hours.

She said she would. "My grandmother's room was like this," she added, looking round again.

I told her that while she was asleep the caretaker would make coffee, and I would see that it was good, and Auntie Lena and I would come and drink it with her, and bring some cakes as well.

She nodded. Then, fumbling in her handbag, she took out the valuables, including the heavy gold chain.

"Here," she said, putting them all in my hands, "take them and look after them for me, otherwise that ——" (and she used the filthiest word) "will talk them out of me yet."

I took the things, and putting them in my overcoat pocket said I would come back in the evening with Auntie Lena.

I found Auntie Lena very depressed and suffering from a slight cold. The servant came in and asked for some money to go shopping with, but when Auntie Lena began to look for her purse she could not find it, and sent the girl to search for it.

Knowing that she frequently engaged girls with bad characters as servants, with the object of reforming them, I asked her how she had come by her present one.

"Oh," she replied, "she could not get a situation because people said she was a thief. But I've watched her during the month she has been here, and I've noticed nothing."

Presently the girl returned, saying she could not find the purse.

"Is it the same old purse, Auntie Lena—the large flat one?" I asked, looking at the girl.

She replied that it was. "But you don't want any money!" she exclaimed, turning to the girl. "They'll give you credit. . . . It does annoy one so," she added, "you can't think! I'm sure my face is like a tomato!" And I could see that she was greatly agitated.

"What will it be like," I replied, "when I tell you what I have done?" And I proceeded to describe my visit to Eilert and to my aunt Sarah Mumm.

She was beside herself. "No, really!" she exclaimed. "What? Sarah Mumm! No, Holler! . . . Why, her eyes used to start out of her head if Uhle happened to let the toast burn, and now there she is in Uhle's room, and I am expected to have coffee with her there!" And she proceeded to explain that for the last thirty years Aunt Sarah had not really been herself, that she had been acting a part. The fact that she was now comfortably installed in Uhle's room and that her hands were dirty proved it. "Her grandmother was a farmer's wife," she said, "but she and her husband got through all their money, and in her old age she became a fish-wife, and looked like a vulture. Now this grandmother is coming out in Sarah Mumm. That's what has happened, my dear!"

I said I was afraid she might go out of her mind. But Auntie Lena scoffed at the idea. "There's not much mind there to go out of!" she declared.

I smiled and asked her what she thought of Eilert.

"Oh, Holler," she replied, "I'm almost more worried about him than about his mother. For if Eilert begins to go downhill he'll go faster than her, and I'm afraid he'll go to bits."

"I don't see how one can help him, either," I said; "he turns everything down."

"If only he had got Eva!" she observed after a while. "Things might have been all right then perhaps!"

"Possibly," I rejoined, "if she had been his mistress . . . but not as his wife. No, he could never have been a husband—even if he had married the Kaiser's most beautiful daughter!"

She agreed, and said that made her glad things had turned out as they had. But with some bitterness I asked her whether we could say even that, as Eva was so far away, with a sick husband, and we should never see her again.

She burst into tears, and declared that she hoped, both for her own sake and mine, that we should see her again, and she believed we should. "Not that I wish her husband to die!" she added. "For he has taken care of my child in a foreign land and has been good to her. But I have a feeling she will come back."

I said I thought he might live a long while yet. But she shook her head. "No, Holler," she replied, "even if you can't, I can read from her letters that she knows she is coming back. He may be strong enough to last until he reaches early middle age, but then it will be all over. And I shouldn't wonder if he has already told her so again and again."

"I don't believe it," I replied sadly and incredulously. "She is lost to us . . . and all through me."

Despite her wretchedness she could not refrain from giving me a knock. "Yes," she replied, "God gave you a fine name and a certain modicum of sense. I can't understand how you could have been such a fool!"

I was angry with myself and also with her for what she had said. "It was my mother's shyness coming out in me," I replied, "and because I was so poor when I was a child. And I shall have to pay for it all my life. We all have to suffer for our natures; we can alter and improve them a little, but not much. Look at that servant of yours, for instance. A moment ago you implied she was no longer a thief, but just you look closely at her when she comes back. She has got your purse stuffed down her breast under her dress. I saw it quite plainly."

She immediately called out to the girl in her beautiful clear voice, and gave her some trifling order. "Yes, you're right!" she observed despondently when she had gone. " But don't get too conceited because you happen to have noticed it, and don't you dare tell Uncle Gosch or anyone else about it. Also, don't imagine you're right and that I shan't be able to reform her. Just leave her to me."

Feeling brighter after this talk with me, she got up, put on her things, and went with me to Aunt Sarah's, where we had a delightful little meal in Uhle's room. They talked of old times—Auntie Lena of Wenneby, and Aunt Sarah of her grandmother, the fish-wife, who was apparently a very good-looking, cheerful creature, with her pocket always full of silver pieces glittering with fish-scales. It was quite entertaining.

. . . . .

A day or two later I wrote to Helmut Busch, partly to tell him how matters stood with Aunt Sarah and Eilert, but chiefly in order to discuss Barbara and persuade him to go to see her.

About a fortnight later I got a letter from him in which he told me that, as far as the law was concerned, Dutti Kohl would probably get off; but in the docks, where there were other regulations, particularly at night, he hoped to get even with him. After he had settled these matters he would turn his attention to Barbara.

Some weeks elapsed without my receiving any news. Then I heard from another source that Barbara had taken a situation as a servant, and that she was most unhappy. I reflected angrily that Helmut was certain to have heard about this, but was allowing her to stew in her own juice for a bit so that in time she would be more amenable; and I persuaded Auntie Lena to accompany me to Hamburg to see her.

As there was nobody to look after Uncle Gosch we took him with us; but, after all, he was only like another piece of luggage, for he sat there buried in a new pamphlet on Basileia, and saw and heard nothing.

At Ballum our carriage was already full of peasants of every description, cattle-dealers, and tradespeople, and Balle Bohnsack, who was among them, immediately constituted himself their leader. He seemed delighted to see us, and told us that he and all his friends were on their way to Altona, either as witnesses or plaintiffs in various suits against Dutti Kohl. They all looked extremely careworn and anxious, and could talk of nothing but the cases which were coming on.

Balle, however, did not appear to be very much perturbed. He was in his best form and in the highest spirits, and looked much tidier since he had been restored to his wife's care. But his small freckled face and squint were the same as ever, as was also the extraordinary mobility of his left eyebrow.

When Auntie Lena saw all the sad faces about her she sighed heavily and held forth on the miseries of the women belonging to her Mothers' Union. "Yes, children," she exclaimed in conclusion, "what an age we live in! It's like living on a volcano."

But Balle would not hear of such a simile. "Excuse me, Auntie Lena," he said, "the ferry is just rocking a little, that's all! And we are wondering whether the railing will bear or whether the cattle will break through and fall into the water. But as a rule the railing does bear."

Auntie Lena, however, declared that she had a very shrewd suspicion that this time the railing would give way, and the men and women all round nodded. She had the majority. She then commiserated them for being connected with Dutti Kohl, even as his opponents in law-suits.

"Quite so!" exclaimed Balle. "Everybody round here knows that Dutti Kohl is a cheat and a lout—everybody!

Why, even the babies in long clothes know it! There's only one body who does not know it, and that is precisely the most important—the judicial bench!"

Auntie Lena nodded, and conveyed by her expression that it was enough to give one the pip.

The whole carriageful sank into depressed silence. As for me, I did not dare to join in the discussion, nor did the others. Everyone felt that the stage belonged to Balle and Auntie Lena.

"Yes," proceeded Auntie Lena, "and the strange thing is that Justice is actually proud of her blindness, and allows herself to be depicted with a bandage over her eyes! All the rest of the world thanks God for being able to see clearly; but Justice thanks God for being blind."

Balle would not have it that the trouble was due to the representatives of the law, but maintained that it was the system. And he proceeded to adduce various examples from his own and Auntie Lena's experience, challenging her to deny the truth of what he said.

Everybody looked at him with the utmost respect; but I for my part felt certain that he would soon get a severe drubbing, particularly as his last argument, which he had obviously got from the newspapers, had not even been well put. Besides, wasn't I half hoping he might get the worst of the encounter for once? Where would such a man end if he didn't get a rebuff occasionally?

But Auntie Lena was too full of pity, and let the opportunity slip. She was of opinion that in nine cases out of ten those who forced others to go to law were either criminals or lunatics.

"If only things went quickly, Auntie Lena," Balle rejoined; "if it were all over in three weeks or a month. But see how these cases last! They drag on for years! I know some that have been going on for two years already!"

Auntie Lena conveyed by a few syllables that she now felt like a whole run full of chickens with the pip, and she called upon God and man to explain how such things could possibly be.

Balle undertook to inform her. It was the system, the rules and regulations, the adjournments and vacations. A law-suit was a disease, a very serious disease. Suppose we all had the plague and the law were our doctor. What should we think of a doctor who suddenly declared, "Well, I won't come now for two months, but will leave the disease alone!" But that was practically how the law behaved!

"Yes," agreed Auntie Lena, "and in the end no one remembers a word about what took place before."

"Quite so!" exclaimed Balle. "Not a soul remembers what took place the last time the court met."

And so it went on, Balle making out the law and the system to be as black as possible, and Auntie Lena constantly wondering how such things could possibly be!

"And the extraordinary part of it all is," Balle pursued in a paroxysm of indignation, "that meanwhile the guilty party loafs about wallowing in the luxuries he has accumulated by stealth and fraud, growing fatter, sleeker, and glossier every minute, and is smiled upon by the whole world!"

"Yes, but how does it come about?" whined Auntie Lena.

"It's the system!" Balle rejoined. "Why, the other day I met our old Ballum acquaintance, the junior judge, and asked him whether he had seen Dutti Kohl lately. And he said he hadn't. So I said: 'He looks very seedy—rather pale about the nose.' And he looked most concerned and asked whether it was serious. 'I won't swear to it,' said I, 'but I'm very much afraid he's going into a decline.' He looked very blue, so I said, 'What if you and I sent him to some hydro or sanatorium at our own expense? Isn't he your most valuable source of revenue? Doesn't he drive one honest fellow after another to the shambles?' And what did he reply? He laughed and said, 'H'm, h'm! Well, we must think it over, Balle!' You see, Auntie Lena, that's how it is."

"Yes," said Auntie Lena, "but how does it all come about?"

Balle was of opinion that it was due to the machinery of the law and all the officials for whom it provided jobs. "Why," he exclaimed, "Dutti Kohl, together with all his vices, could be disposed of in three and a half hours, and it would cost about twenty-five marks. . . . But the vast antiquated machinery and all the officials—where would they be in that case?"

Auntie Lena could not understand why it could not be changed. "Surely," she said, "there must be some intelligent people in the law!"

Balle agreed it was a mystery. Nobody seemed to know why these old institutions were not reformed. He supposed they had grown too unwieldy.

"But the people!" cried Auntie Lena, "the Government . . . why don't they do something to alter it?"

"The people are just as incapable, listless, and indolent," replied Balle, "and that's what's meant by the Decline of the Western World."

Auntie Lena gasped for breath, and every one gazed awestruck at Bohnsack. He was in an ecstasy of excitement. Never had I seen his left eyebrow make such daring jerks, nor had I ever felt so angry with him, or so envious of his power.

But Auntie Lena soon recovered herself, and proceeded to retaliate. Opening her eyes wide, she advised him not to meddle with such matters, but to stick to his oxen and his friends.

Meanwhile our carriage had been getting fuller and fuller. People were standing closely packed in the gangway, and one or two boys had even climbed up into the luggage racks to get a better view of the debaters. Some voices were heard imploring Auntie Lena to stand up in the corridor, others suggesting that she ought to change compartments every ten minutes, so that every one might have the advantage of listening, while somebody who could not see her called out: "Who are you people over there who are talking so wisely?"

Auntie Lena introduced herself and Balle, and then made none too polite a reference to me.

"Don't forget your husband!" I exclaimed tartly.

"Yes," said Auntie Lena, still addressing the owner of the voice who had asked the last question, "he is here too. But he is reading about Pytheas, which you would not understand. And now shut up, because you won't get the better of us. Thank goodness, we have far too great a gift of the gab. . . . Yes, unfortunately, Holler! . . .

But what a thing to ask! Fancy interrupting us like that without being invited! . . . Go on, my son. . . . Is the train still going the right way?"

"Yes," I replied, "and we shall soon be there."

When we reached Altona nearly everybody in the carriage turned out and crowded round us, as all who had not yet done so wanted to get a glimpse of the two protagonists in the debate. Meanwhile I had some difficulty in getting Uncle Gosch to leave the train. He was buried in his book, and was not aware that the train had stopped, or even that he was in a train at all.

When at last we reached the other side of the barrier we saw Balle Bohnsack coming out of the bar with half a dozen cattle-dealers. They had evidently been waiting for him, and all appeared to be in the best of spirits.

On the way to the court we heard that there had again been disturbances in Hamburg, and when we reached the building we found the long corridor upstairs thronged with all kinds of people who were sitting about on the benches. I looked for a place for Uncle Gosch and his book; then turning round saw Auntie Lena engaged in animated conversation with a number of rustics. So I proceeded to watch Balle Bohnsack's movements, and saw him go down the corridor, looking in at the various doors, and evidently trying to make friends with the attendants as they wandered in and out. Addressing a man staggering along with a huge pile of documents in his arms, I heard him ask how long the case connected with these papers had lasted.

"Oh," whined the man, "about two years."

"Really?" said Balle in pitying tones, "with us it lasts about an hour and a half, or if there's grog going round it may last three hours."

The fellow grew suspicious and asked him who he was.

"A cattle-dealer, my dear boy," replied Balle, looking gravely at him.

The man turned round, shaking his head, and Balle continued on his way.

I don't know whether he was altogether unconnected with an accident that happened to another attendant, from whose arms a great tower of documents slid to the ground, but he certainly helped the man to pick them up. As he did so he asked him earnestly whether it was absolutely necessary for them to be picked up.

The attendant replied that it was certainly most necessary.

So Balle suggested that they should make a hole in the ground and bury all the documents in the building in it and carry on by word of mouth.

When this attendant also had passed on Balle continued to peep in at the various doors, until at last some one asked him what he thought he was doing and told him to stop fooling about.

"But, my dear fellow, don't you know what we are doing?" Balle inquired. "We are looking for Justice. People say she is somewhere here, but we've been looking for her for nine months and can't find her. The case is Bohnsack *versus* Herr Dutti Kohl."

The attendant shook his head and shut the door in Balle's face.

Hardly had Balle turned round before Dutti Kohl could be seen coming along the corridor, waddling like an elephant. As he approached us I saw that he looked very nervous; his lips were twitching, and now and again his big white face, with the thin hair above it, jerked sideways, and his eyes looked exhausted from lack of sleep. When he saw us standing together he hesitated, and pretended to look for something in the large portfolio he was carrying in his great fat hand.

But in her fine rich voice Auntie Lena called out: "Dear me, so there you are, Kohl! . . . Come over here a moment. Aren't we old acquaintances?"

Dutti cast a cold sidelong glance at me, and another at Balle Bohnsack, and drawing closer shook Auntie Lena's hand.

"Well, Kohl," she said, "now just tell us how many families you have reduced to misery."

For a moment Dutti did not know what to answer, so Balle, who had just joined us, said feelingly: "He can't reckon them all up at once like that, Auntie Lena."

Auntie Lena proceeded to tease him about his night's rest, till at last in his confusion he caught my eye, and in tones of injured innocence asked me whether it was not true that he and his father had always deplored the foolish way people rushed to ruin. "We always said they ought to be better educated," he concluded, "didn't we, Babendiek?"

I was just on the point of agreeing when Auntie Lena broke in and reminded him that he and his father only expressed these regrets after they had foisted their rotten goods on people and the money lay in their till. "It was the same with the bituminous soil!" she cried. "No, go away, sir! . . . Your name is being called."

We all got up and followed the others into the court, and sat down on the first bench we could find. As Auntie Lena and I had never been in a court of law before, we examined everything with the greatest interest.

About five or six officials were sitting in their gowns at a table, and in front of them, each with a desk of his own, sat two younger men, also in gowns.

The proceedings opened. The two younger men said something which we could not understand, and as they spoke they placed first one foot and then the other on the cross-bars of their little desks. Then each in turn pushed a number of books towards one of the judges. The latter drew the books towards them and perused them. The two young men then became excited, and pursued their antics with their desks. It appeared that one of them wanted a certain witness to be examined, and the other did not. Dutti Kohl was standing one or two paces to the left, with the witness, a short, bent fellow, beside him. Bohnsack was standing on the other side.

The bench of judges in their gowns had completely taken Auntie Lena's breath away; and it was only when the proceedings had lasted some time that she asked in a whisper who the two young men were who were trying so hard to climb up their desks, but could not succeed.

I said I thought they must be the lawyers, and that the tall thin one was Dutti's counsel.

The President ruled that the witness should be heard, and the man began to give his evidence.

At that moment Balle stepped forward. "Excuse me, Herr Präsident," he said, with profound respect, "but this man is a cattle-dealer and an old acquaintance. Now we cattle-dealers have a sort of guild, and this man attested before us last year that he was incapable of speaking the truth. Here is the attestation, signed by his own hand. The three crosses are his, the endorsement is the guild's." Then pointing his thumb over his shoulder, he added: "They're sitting at the back there. . . . They're the fellows in the light shirts."

One or two of the court officials laughed.

The President took the certificate, read it, and whispered to the judge at his side. Then he said benevolently: "We must consider what our attitude to this witness should be." Balle's counsel seemed to be telling him that he should only speak when he was spoken to.

Balle nodded, bent a knee to loosen his breeches, and, straightening himself, replied: "Then will you please ask me whether I have any further documents on me?"

The President looked up and was about to say something, but the keen human interest he felt in Bohnsack evidently sealed his lips, and, looking towards him, he merely smiled faintly.

"The counsel for the defence," said Balle, "was known eight years ago all over Ballum as a wild dog, if I may be allowed to say so. And in those days he wrote a letter to a friend of mine, a painter. I have the letter here with me. It opens as follows: 'Dear Eilert, brother in drink and song.' Of course I know, just as well as you and the whole of Ballum know, that Dutti Kohl, with his glassware and his bituminous soil, and everything else he is connected with, is a born swindler! . . . But if, Herr Präsident, he knows that, how can he stand there defending him, as though he were defending a just cause?"

"If you please, Herr Präsident," interposed the tall lawyer, "Herr Bohnsack . . ."

"Herr Präsident," interjected Balle, with the utmost respect, and bending again to get his belt and breeches more comfortable, "don't take any notice of this gentleman's 'Herr Bohnsack.' We are old friends, and in the harbour tavern at Ballum we swore eternal friendship long ago, and called each other by our Christian names, and not only after midnight either—that would not mean much—but before. So his 'Herr Bohnsack' means nothing."

The President smiled again. "Now you must be quiet and sit down," he said, "and not disturb the regular proceedings again."

Balle Bohnsack thought, as most people instinctively do, that the President, a learned, powerful, and self-reliant judge, was sitting there with his colleagues to get at the truth as quickly as possible, after which, on the authority he held from the people or the King, he would pass judgment. So, making a little bow, he said with deep respect and a sort of friendly courtesy: "But, Herr Präsident, I am the very man who is most anxious to settle the matter in as orderly a way as possible, and quickly too."

The President glanced inquiringly at him.

"I know for certain, Herr Präsident," he continued, "that in two or three days at the utmost we shall be able to bring this Herr Kohl to you trussed and bound."

The President asked him what he meant.

"Well, it's this way, Herr Präsident," pursued Balle; "here he is careering round like a free man, putting on airs and briefing counsel to defend him . . . but we—that is to say, a number of cattle-dealers, myself, and another man—know all about his little games. . . ."

The President told him to explain briefly what he meant.

"Why, he's smuggling stolen Army stores abroad," replied Balle, "whole cargoes at a time. . . . I don't mind saying so, because he will not escape us again now."

"That has nothing to do with the present case," observed the President.

"Excuse me, Herr Präsident," Balle rejoined, "surely this is a court of law!"

"You must report that to the Public Prosecutor," said the President.

Balle reflected for a moment. "No, Herr Präsident," he replied with great conviction and assurance, "we shall not do that! . . . I bet a sheep—I mean to say, we'll do it ourselves. We'll catch him. . . . And then everybody will know he is a rascal, and you gentlemen will not have to bother any more."

"Nevertheless, we shall not dismiss the case," the President replied.

I can't say exactly what my old friend looked like at this moment, but I saw from the movement of his shoulders that he was greatly agitated. "Really?" he cried in utter bewilderment.

Dutti Kohl was standing stock-still, looking like a fat pillar. He glanced at his lawyer, and they exchanged a few words in a whisper. Then the whole of his great body twitched nervously and left him shaking. The dusty indifference pervading the court had vanished; there was a breathless silence. Balle Bohnsack had introduced the blood of life, smiles, and heart-beats into the sepulchral atmosphere.

But the President raised his hand, and looking gravely and thoughtfully at the men standing before him said wearily that the case would be adjourned until such and such a date.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Huntsmen Seize their Quarry

When we left the court we rejoined Uncle Gosch and found him absorbed in his book. But far from accepting our apologies for having kept him waiting so long, he seemed annoyed at having to leave so soon. I am certain that as he followed us out he had not the faintest idea where he had been.

I went with the two old people to lunch at the Schleswiger Hof. After the meal, while Auntie Lena was having her nap, a letter was brought to me from Helmut, in which he said he had heard that Barbara was in a bad way. She had taken a situation that did not suit her, at an address which he gave me, and he begged me and Auntie Lena to go to see her.

I woke up Auntie Lena and read her the letter, and she gave me permission to call on Barbara alone. So after promising to be back in good time, as we had been invited to the Sooths that evening, I left.

I found the flat described by Helmut on the third floor of a house in a low quarter of Hasselbrook, and I must already have had a premonition of how matters stood, when I was met at the foot of the stairs by a musty, unwholesome smell and a sluttish woman in shabby slippers.

I inquired whether Fräulein Mumm was at home, saying I was her cousin and would like a word with her.

"Anybody can say that," the woman replied, looking sullenly at me.

"You won't prevent me from speaking to Fräulein Mumm," I replied.

We argued for some time. "She actually refuses to bring our coffee to our bedroom and to clean my husband's boots," the woman declared.

I thought of my proud relative, and smiling again, asked where she was.

"In her room, crying," was the peevish reply.

I went along the passage and called her, and I heard her answering from the other end. So I went on and came to a little room which had no window and was almost entirely filled by the bed. And there, on the edge of the bed, I saw Barbara sobbing pitifully.

She had recognized my voice; but she did not look up. "This is terrible!" she murmured, sobbing more violently than ever.

"Come along with me," I said gently. "This is no place for you."

Her tear-stained eyes stared up at me. "May I go then?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course you may go," I replied. "You can't be made to stop here against your will."

"Really?" she cried, opening her clever round eyes wide. "May I go with you?"

I nodded. "Get up," I said, "and pack your things. Where's your box?"

The woman at the other end of the passage called out that she had heard every word and did not care if I did take Barbara away, but that she would not get a halfpenny of her wages.

"That doesn't matter!" I replied, and Barbara and I proceeded to pack the box as fast as we could. When we had finished and taken it to the foot of the stairs a pair of boots came flying after us, accompanied by a volley of the choicest language. And thus we went out into the street, with the box between us and a boot in each hand. Outside, we packed the boots, then, sitting on the box, thought things over, with people and traffic all round us.

I could not help admiring her courage for having set to work the moment she knew she was penniless, but was surprised by her weak subservience to that slut upstairs. I could see that she felt terribly humiliated, and was tremendously relieved at having been rescued.

Glancing at her, I saw she still looked frightened. "You are not cut out to be a heroine, are you, Barbara?" I exclaimed.

"I can't believe I am out of that place and rid of those dreadful people," she replied with a sigh.

I asked her why she had not run away; she said she thought she must put up with it. Besides, she had nowhere to go.

She told me how her mother had been robbed of all she possessed, and I gave her my version of what I had seen at Ballum. When I had finished she got up, tidied her frock, and again sighing deeply, exclaimed: "No, it was horrible, Holler! To think I am free! . . . But what is to become of me? We haven't got a halfpenny!"

I tried to comfort her, saying she was no worse off than thousands of others. "Besides," I added maliciously, "there's Dutti Kohl."

"Oh, shut up!" she cried.

I scolded her for frittering away her best years, but she said that as soon as she had become really attached to a man during the war he had been killed. And after the war there had been only sheep and wolves, and she had fallen among wolves.

"There were shepherds as well as sheep and wolves," I said. But she declared she had never met them.

I told her about Helmut and how he had been slaving almost day and night. "There's a shepherd for you, Barbara," I observed. "But, of course, he is only the son of the ferryman, just as I am only the son of a village blacksmith."

She shrugged her shoulders and did not answer.

I tried to point out how foolish she had been, but she would not listen. "Get hold of the other side of the box, you silly man," was all she said.

We left the box at the railway station to be forwarded, and returned to the centre of the town. On the way, as we were near Helmut's factory, I suggested we should call on him.

She was silent a moment; then she nodded and we went in.

We found him in a large shed, surrounded by fresh hides, horns, and butcher's offal. It was all very clean, but hardly picturesque. I went in first and told him that Barbara was with me.

He looked over at her. I know that he was passionately in love with her and was certain she was going to be his. But he had such perfect control over himself that he remained quite calm and collected as he went out with me. "I'm afraid you won't like this place," he said as he shook hands.

As his expression and words were cold and haughty she again assumed the airs she had adopted towards him ever since they were children. "It may not be beautiful," she said, "but surely I may be allowed to look at it!"

He then led her through the vast establishment, introducing us to the unassuming heads of departments, of whom he was the youngest. Everywhere we saw silent industry, order, and the utmost economy of labour and material.

As we went out he asked me to remind him to tell me something about Dutti Kohl, but when I urged him to do so at once he repeatedly put me off. At last Barbara grew angry, and accused him of always being against her.

"How was I to know how much you liked him?" he replied coldly.

"Oh," she exclaimed contemptuously, "never, never have I had anything to do with him! I only played with him! I won't say that about the others though," she added angrily.

"Indeed?" he replied with scorn. "And you dare to tell me that, do you? But let me tell you this—I don't care a rap what you've done, so you won't hurt me in that way."

She turned an uneasy, frightened face to him. "I didn't mean to hurt you," she said. "I only wanted to tell you."

"I don't care," he rejoined, "what you did in the past. But what you do from now onwards I do care about very much." And suddenly seizing her by the shoulders, and groaning with mingled hatred and love, he shook her violently. "Your philandering days are over, let me tell you!" And he shook her again so violently that I was afraid he would hurt her.

At last he stopped and groaned, and I could hear from their breathing how agitated they both were. Barbara was pale to the lips and trembling, but she was not crying.

"Barbara is coming to Ballum with us to-morrow," I said at the gate of the factory. "Come and look us up soon."

He had calmed down, and, putting an arm across her shoulder, he led her aside and whispered a few words in her ear. She nodded, and he brought her back. "I'll come over in a day or two," he said as he left us.

When we were walking towards the station alone she put her arm in mine. "What a brute the man is!" she exclaimed. "I'll have a lot to put up with from him!"

Thinking she might wish to say something about Dutti Kohl, I asked her about him.

"Oh," she cried, "don't let's discuss him!" And she proceeded to taunt me with being no better than herself, mentioning the names of various girls, and declaring that if Eva did not come back to mother and grandmother me she did not dare to think what would become of me.

We parted at the station. She went to collect a few things from some friends, and I returned to Altona and the Schleswiger Hof, where, fetching my old people, we all went to Paul Sooth.

To my surprise we found only Clara and the two children at home. She told us that Paul had left home at dusk and she did not know where he had gone, adding that Balle had been there a good deal lately, questioning Paul about the people who lived on the other side of the passage. Paul, she declared, had been looking most terribly blue for weeks.

We had not been talking long before Paul himself entered, and I saw immediately from his expression that he was in an extremely agitated state of mind. He sat down at table and ate a little, but complained bitterly about the times, and seemed to be listening all the while to what was happening outside.

I was on the point of asking him what was the matter when we heard the front door open, and Balle appeared. He went straight up to Paul and seized him by the collar. "Your neighbour left the house," he exclaimed, his eyebrow jerking more wildly than ever, "and you followed him . . . and yet you did not come and tell us where he was!"

We all watched the scene with amazement, while Clara, who had only glanced at her husband's face, burst out laughing, and one of the children followed suit, while the other began to cry.

When Paul had recovered sufficiently to be able to speak he muttered the name of the street to which his neighbour had fled, and said he had entered the third or fourth house on the left, on the river side. Never had I seen him look so terrified, and I am sure he had never seen things blacker. "Must I go with you?" he asked.

In reply to a question from Auntie Lena, Balle explained that after what he had said in court that morning it was quite obvious that Dutti Kohl would try to get his goods on board if possible that same night. But although they had kept a close watch on him he had succeeded in eluding them. "And just imagine!" he exclaimed, pointing to Paul, "this villain knows where he is, but keeps it dark out of pure funk, in case he should have to go with us! . . . You'll come with us at once!" And so saying he seized him by the collar again.

Auntie Lena and I both volunteered to go as well; but when I suggested that Auntie Lena might be one too many Balle took me to task, saying he could think of no occasion which would not be graced by the presence of Auntie Lena.

So we all got into a car, Balle taking the seat by the driver, and drove down the Königstrasse. Balle turned round from time to time to inveigh against poor Paul, or against Dutti Kohl's two confederates, one of whom Balle and his mates had tried in vain to intoxicate. "But he has admitted he knows Kohl," said Balle, "and that he is trading in Army stores; he even gave us a list of the bales, but we couldn't get anything more out of him. The other fellow, who lives near Sooth, was so violent that we did not dare to go near him, but fortunately we had that brave fellow there to look after him."

Paul Sooth leant forward to defend himself, declaring that he was the bravest of the lot, because he at least was fully aware of the terrible risks they were running. Whereupon Auntie Lena implored Balle to be cautious.

In the Admiralitätstrasse we stopped at the police station and waited till Balle came out with a number of policemen, among whom I recognized Helmut by his voice. They followed in a second car. At a certain spot along the docks both cars stopped, and we got out on to a bridge. When our eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness we saw a barge and a long slide reaching right down to it from a broken-down warehouse, from which came the sound of men at work. Balle went along to one of the doors, and looked in to see whether he could discover any light or noise. At that moment the door opened quietly, and a big man in working clothes appeared in the opening. When he saw the dark group in front of him he tried to retreat and close the door again; but Balle put his foot in the opening, flung the door wide, and followed the retreating figure inside. It was Dutti Kohl. Auntie Lena and I went in behind the rest; but there was no sign of Sooth.

Kohl recognized us at once, although there was only a faint glimmer of light coming from a lamp at the far end of the room.

"Yes," said Auntie Lena, sitting on the stairs and holding her large umbrella firmly in front of her, "here we are, Kohl. We have come to see what you are doing here."

Looking darkly from one to the other, he said he couldn't think what we wanted with him at that hour; if we had any designs against him he would call his men to turn us out.

But Balle, with his back to the door, told him that his men could do nothing now, as the police were on the barge and all round the building.

I believe for a moment he meditated violence. But at heart he was a weakling and a coward. "I know," he cried, letting his fat body drop on a case, "you've been spying on me for a long time!"

Balle and Dutti then exchanged a few touching compliments; I don't think I ever heard Balle speak in more grandfatherly tones.

At last half a dozen policemen came up the stairs from the water and from the back of the warehouse. They had surprised the three dock labourers at work on the barge. At the same moment the door of the warehouse was opened and Helmut appeared with more policemen.

"That's the man," he said, pointing to Dutti Kohl.

Dutti was dumbfounded, and exclaimed that the whole thing was a conspiracy to prevent him from getting Barbara, whom he did not want. She was too poor and shop-soiled.

Meanwhile Helmut was sitting down writing his report. His calm expression did not change, and he shrugged his shoulders. "Haven't I seen life too?" he said. "She is a healthy, beautiful girl, and that is all I care about."

Dutti assured him that as he was only a ferryman's son he could never hope to win her, penniless though she was.

"But she's mine already," Helmut rejoined. "To-night, when you are lying in your cell, I shall be with her." Dutti groaned. He was shaking with envy and hatred.

"You should think of other things now, Dutti," I said, feeling sorry for him.

"What other things?" he cried. "Of the hours you used to spend as a boy in our cosy parlour, eating our sandwiches?"

Auntie Lena now began to upbraid him, reminding him of all the people he had ruined, and of her son Ernemann, whom he and Fritz Hellebeck had falsely accused of theft. And she dug him in the ribs with her umbrella.

Dutti protested that he had had nothing to do with the matter. "It was that knave and fool Hellebeck!" he cried.

But Auntie Lena proceeded to enumerate a few more of his victims, making him wince at each name. "No," she cried, "one begins to doubt whether you are human! You are nothing but a blot and a blemish on the face of the earth! That's what you are! And now you're going to pay for it. I hope for some time."

"Don't you worry, Frau Bornholt," he replied, smiling scornfully. "There will be a revolution or an upheaval of some sort, and I shall be let out. Old Dutti Kohl is not done for yet!" Then, turning to Helmut, he added: "And as for you, you ought to have had a fine business by this time, instead of playing the bloodhound to a Government that will break up to-morrow."

"I don't think it will break up," Helmut replied calmly. "I believe it will grow stronger and more stable every day."

Auntie Lena proceeded to address Dutti's accomplices, inquiring about their wives and children. As they made no reply, she was just beginning to lecture them about right and wrong when the sound of a heavy car was heard, the door was thrown open, and the prisoners were taken away.

There were other prisoners in the lorry, and when Dutti and his companions had been settled in we all drove away, the lorry going on ahead. To our surprise, we found that Paul Sooth had been sitting in the corner of our car all the while. "You evidently didn't want to be there when I was shot through the head!" cried Auntie Lena with shrill indignation.

"I couldn't bear it!" he moaned.

"But I have not been shot through the head after all!" she rejoined.

"But you might have been, Auntie Lena," he said. And he pulled his large hat so low over his eyes that it was impossible to address any further remarks to him.

. . . . .

The following morning we met Barbara at the station, and we all went back to Ballum together. Early the next day I went to Eilert to give him the news.

On the ferry I told old Busch all about Aunt Sarah and how she was living in Uhle's room in her old house. He was astonished and distressed. He did not like the idea that my aunt's grandmother, the fish-wife, was coming out in her, and I could see that he hoped she would one day regain her former pomp and magnificence.

I then told him about Helmut and the part he had played in catching Dutti Kohl. But apparently the mention of Helmut revived memories of the sons he had lost, and he turned sadly and silently away.

When I asked him about Eilert he shook his head and said he was exceedingly worried about him. His drinking bouts and wild orgies did not matter so much, because he always worked hard at his pictures afterwards. The most disquieting feature was the fanaticism with which he was pursuing his reclamation plans.

Bidding him good-bye, I walked along the dyke towards the sheep-farm. But I had not gone far when I came across Eilert surrounded by officials, local landowners, and others, discussing his schemes, and I was struck by the decided change for the worse in his appearance. He did not look so much a drunkard as a neurasthenic whose mind was unhinged. He had a hard, gloomy expression in his eyes, and in his hand he held a spade.

I greeted one or two friends and heard Eilert remark coldly: "Undertakings on a small scale do not interest me."

"But," protested a local inspector of lands and forests, "surely it is not so bad to reclaim two lots of two thousand five hundred acres apiece in ten years? And then we go on to more!"

Eilert shrugged his shoulders. "It does not interest me," he repeated. "We are a nation cooped up in too small a space; and shall never be any good in the world if we go on like that. We want breathing-space, so that we can hope and laugh and enjoy our lives. There is still room in East Germany for three hundred thousand young peasants, who are kicking their heels at home with their sweethearts. But nobody does anything except lament the lack of money and land. But there is no lack of money and land! All that is lacking is good will! Why, a small province could be reclaimed here. It is not for me to devise schemes. You are the expert. You must make the plans! But make them on a large scale—I mean commensurate with the distress they are meant to relieve!"

All sorts of arguments were advanced against him, and for a while there was a hubbub of voices. I am not in a position to say who was right; but I had the feeling that, as is frequently the case, the truth lay half-way between the opposing claims.

The representative of the competent Government department and the other authorities were evidently handling Eilert tactfully. But an aristocrat from East Holstein happened to say something derogatory about his scheme, and immediately afterwards a local farmer observed: "It is a question of money, Eilert, and who has any money to-day? We have a little credit, and a little money from our crops, but that is all. How much have you got? Have you still got that Dutch money?"

He suddenly went deathly pale, and an evil light shone in his eyes. Then lifting up his heavy spade—which made them scatter in all directions—he flung it with all his might as far as he could out on to the beach. "Come with me," he said to the workmen, and strode away.

They followed him, and I went with them. Knowing him as we did, we said nothing.

On reaching the sheep-farm we met Bothilde. "The whole crowd are either slackers or swindlers," he observed. . . .

"They won't do it . . . and I don't want to stop here any longer. . . . Come along . . . we'll pack up and go . . . go away . . . simply go away!"

I pointed out that he had been longing to move for some time, and it was not merely this last affair that had made him wish to go. He was feeling the call of other climes and other scenes.

"How you do chatter!" he scoffed.

When I asked him where he proposed to go he replied: "To Amsterdam or Antwerp, or anywhere where people still believe in the future of Europe."

Meanwhile Bothilde, a little paler than usual, began in her quiet way to put the portfolios, sketching blocks, and books together.

Presently Uhle came in from the fields. When she saw the disorder she knew at once what was afoot, and the mad look she always had in moments of confusion entered her eyes.

"I must go away for a bit," Eilert told her gently. She flushed slightly. "You will stop here and look after the house, and pay us a visit from time to time as you did at Övelgönne."

I believe she knew him better than he knew himself, and felt that when once his heart had turned away from his home the destructive forces within him would gain the upper hand. But she was stupid and inarticulate, like the beasts of the field, and could not marshal her thoughts.

I could not bear to see the look of pain in her dear old face, and turning to Eilert asked him when he was going.

"Early to-morrow," he replied in the same cold tones.

I told him that I would come the next day to see Uhle, and, shaking hands with him and Bothilde, left the house.

On reaching home I found Auntie Lena alone. Uncle Gosch had gone to Basileia, where he was arranging some excavations, and had taken Barbara with him to show her the place. So I told Auntie Lena what had happened.

She burst into tears, and said that whereas with some people she felt she could help, with others, like her two children and Eilert, she knew that she could do nothing. And she asked me the reason.

I replied sadly that I was afraid there was no hope. "There is a demon in him," I said. "It once lent him his glory and his strength, but it is casting a shadow over his face and his soul now."

She nodded, and the great tears rolled down from her beautiful large eyes.

"Such people are like butterflies," I pursued. "One watches them and wonders where they are going and what will become of them." I was thinking of myself, and crept silently out of the room.

The following day I crossed the river again, and while I was on the ferry I happened to see Helmut and Barbara walking along the dyke in the distance. I called old Busch's attention to the couple.

"What is he doing with her?" he exclaimed, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Why, they are going to be married," I replied.

He could not believe it. Never had I seen a man look more amazed. He seemed proud of his son, and for the first time for years thoroughly to approve of him. "Whatever will Mother say?" he kept repeating.

On reaching the sheep-farm I saw all kinds of cases and crates lying about, and smoke issuing from the kitchen door and window. But I did not pay any particular attention to this, as I concluded paper was being burnt. Bothilde was in the stables, beating a fur coat, which she had hung on the line. She told me that Eilert had gone by an early train, and that she was following him at midday.

I saw that the coat she was beating was Dieter Blank's sheepskin, and I asked her whether she knew about it.

"About Dieter Blank?" she inquired.

I nodded, asking whether she knew how the coat had come into Eilert's hands.

She shook her head and I told her.

She looked surprised and turned a little pale, but otherwise made no sign. "Oh, really?" she exclaimed. "That's just like Balle!" When I tried to draw her out, and said that Dieter had probably done it more for her than for Eilert, she added: "Perhaps so! But when I think of the thousands who died a lingering death on the field of battle —he at least had things easier, didn't he?" Then she asked me to go and say a friendly word to Uhle, who was behaving wonderfully.

Turning towards the kitchen, I shook my head in silent wonder, while Bothilde began beating the fur again. In my mind's eye I could see the poor little crooked body lying there, gradually being covered with snow. "For you!" I thought bitterly, "and it didn't even give you a pang!" And the memory of many others to whom no one gave a thought also recurred to my mind.

As I approached the kitchen door the smell of burning no doubt made me look up, and I saw that smoke was now coming from the roof. I quickly made a dash for the door.

And there I saw Uhle standing, flushed and dishevelled, in front of a huge fire of packing-paper and bits of wood, poking and coaxing it higher and higher, uttering coarse maniacal yells, while the beams above her head were already burning and flames could be seen through the cracks in the ceiling.

Shouting to her, I dragged her to the door, and yelled and signalled to Bothilde, the neighbours, and the ferry. Then, dashing back into the house, I tried, first alone, and then with the help of Bothilde and the neighbours, to save as much as possible. But what with the old wood and the wind that was always playing round the house the fire quickly got the upper hand, and we had to abandon the place to the flames.

All this time, despite my frenzied efforts to save what little I could, I had not allowed Uhle out of my sight, and when I rejoined her I found her muttering incoherently about heaven and earth, the fire and Eilert. She did not seem to hear my friendly words, but persisted in thinking that Eilert was in the attics being burnt with the house.

So we took her to the ferry-house, where it became plain that she had completely lost control of herself. I wanted to stop with her, but the others promised to look after her, and persuaded me to go back to Ballum in case my old people might be anxious about me.

When I told them what had happened Barbara said very little. In her sensuous, self-centred way she was probably thinking of her own affairs. Then, hearing a call from the direction of the river, she got up and left the house.

Later on, when I was alone in my room, thinking over all that had happened to my friends and acquaintances, I could not help seeing that my own fate too had become extremely uncertain since the war, and that I was quite at a loose end, not knowing what to do. For all those whose faces my imagination conjured up had been endowed with gifts and blessings from God, yet for all that they had gone to pieces; and I asked myself when my turn would come. Perhaps it would come quite soon. The agony I felt, and which I had tasted before, though never quite so acutely as at this moment, was part of my inheritance from my dear mother, and it was so excruciating that it took my breath away and made great beads of perspiration stand out on my brow.

My loneliness terrified me, and, anxiously passing my whole circle of friends in review, my thoughts wandered to Eva. I imagined her back in Ballum, living with us, and trying to be my friend. But I derived no comfort from the thought; on the contrary—and I cried out to her not to come. I knew I could not endure her friendship. Then, in order to gain courage, I tried to persuade myself that hitherto, despite occasional trials, I had not fared so badly after all; and passing a hand over my brow I tried to smile. But it was no good. I was obsessed by the fear that my good star had set, and that my world was sinking into the abyss. At my wits' end, and not knowing where to turn for help, I sank at last on my knees, and prayed the Powers who had already helped me so much to help me once again to deal with a difficulty that was beyond the scope of my reason.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Unexpected Visitors

At breakfast next day I told my adoptive parents that, if it were agreeable to them, I should like to spend my summers in Stormfeld and my winters with them at Ballum. "Every man," I said, "even the strongest, draws his energy all through life from his childhood and youth. Surrounded by the scenes of his childhood he derives help from old memories; but away from them he is homesick from morning to night."

They agreed to my proposal, and were very glad that I did not intend to forsake them altogether.

I told them that although I still owned my parents' house at Stormfeld Engel Tiedje was living in it, and as I did not wish to turn him out, or make things uncomfortable for him, I proposed to buy another house, where they could come to visit me for as long as they liked during the summer.

They were obviously delighted and touched.

As for Uhle, I asked them whether it would not be best to take her back to Engel Tiedje. After all, he was alone, and always spoke well of her, although he was a little frightened of her; and she might be glad to look after him in his old age. I thought it might provide a happy ending to their lives, and it would suit me very well, because they were the faithful old friends of my childhood.

Uncle Gosch agreed, as did also Auntie Lena with tears in her eyes. "But, clever as your scheme is," she added, "you must not imagine you are as clever as Uncle Gosch, because you would never have been able to discover Basileia!"

I acknowledged this with a smile, and went to telephone to Engel Tiedje to warn him that I was going to bring Uhle over the next day.

I had a long altercation with the poor old boy, and could hear him puffing and blowing, and picture him wiping his brow with his old red handkerchief, imagining all the terrible things that would happen if he agreed.

At last I took him to task, saying he was evidently terrified and that he was an old coward.

Eventually he asked very dejectedly whether I really wanted him to take her back.

I replied that I certainly thought he ought to give the plan a trial.

"All right, if you really mean it," he replied with considerable hesitation.

In his eyes I was evidently still the prince. I told him that I certainly did mean it, and that I would come over the next day or the day after. I added that I had no intention of leaving him alone with Uhle, but wished to live with him at Stormfeld in the summer.

This seemed to relieve his mind considerably, and he agreed with alacrity.

When I was out in the street again I thought how lonely and unsettled my life would be, particularly in the summer, without a wife and children; and thus my thoughts veered round once more to Eva. I knew from her last letter that her husband was ill again, but beyond feeling sorry for them I had not given the matter another thought; for I had always taken it for granted that he would live to be an old man, and that she was lost to me for ever.

Having inquired about Uhle and heard that she was calmer, I returned home to find Auntie Lena with two letters in her hand, and Uncle Gosch out.

She handed me the letters. "Eva's husband died two months ago," she said, with tears in her eyes. "Here is her letter, and also one from Sven asking whether she has arrived yet."

My heart was thumping so hard that I could scarcely speak. I gasped for breath. "You know what I feel for her!" I stammered at last. I did not dare to say "what we feel for each other" . . . "and what this means to me!"

As I stood there trying to comfort Auntie Lena, who was crying bitterly, while the whole place seemed to rock and swim before my eyes, the front-door bell rang, and a telegram was handed in.

It was from Eva to say she had landed at Bremerhaven with her child, and would reach Ballum at ten that morning.

"We must go to the station at once!" I exclaimed.

Auntie Lena tried to stand up, but her legs gave way and she sank back into her chair.

I rebuked her for her weakness, but she was quite overcome, and said it was all too sudden and that she could not help herself.

So I ran to the station alone and reached there just in time.

How can I describe my feelings as the train steamed in and the doors flew open! How eagerly I scanned the crowd that immediately thronged the platform! Suddenly I saw a little boy in a strange-looking suit standing at one of the doors . . . But was not the woman behind him a stranger to me? . . . No! . . . She was waving! . . .

Dashing forward, I lifted the little boy down and then helped her.

"So here we are, Holler!" she cried, and her tone of voice seemed to say "in your hands at last!" Then, bending over the child, she said: "This is Holler. He calls you Holler," she added, turning to me, her eyes full of tears. "You mustn't mind my crying, Holler. I'm so terribly happy to see you all again and to be able to stop with you. Frederick wanted me to. . . . But now there are two who have gone—him and Ernemann."

I nodded, and stroked her cheek and told her how brave she had been to go all that way for Ernemann's sake. Then, putting an arm round her, I led her away.

At the barrier she suddenly remarked that she had read my last book; the senior officer on board her liner had lent it to her. "Holler all over!" she exclaimed.

"You mean—Holler the boy?" I said.

She nodded and smiled.

"We take time to ripen here," I observed, "but since that day we said good-bye on that little station in Schleswig I hope I have got on. I hope I am a man in your eyes now. A little late in the day, I agree!"

She scanned my features timidly and blushed. She was evidently thinking of that other farewell in Los Angeles six years previously.

"We are both entering the summer of life," I said gravely.

She nodded and squeezed my hand as it lay in hers. "I know," she replied.

When we reached the market-place we saw Uncle Gosch, tired and dusty, evidently just back from Basileia. He was buried in thought. Latterly, ever since his memory had begun to play him tricks, he always carried a little leather bag slung by a strap from his neck, into which he dropped notes or anything else he happened to come across. But at that moment he was so deep in thought that the bag was hanging open in front of him without his being aware of it. "Eva," I said, "look, there's your father! . . . He wasn't at home when your news came. He knows nothing."

"Won't he be frightened?" she asked.

"Oh, no!" I replied with a smile, my heart overflowing with love for him. "If he heard that Pytheas and his Age had never existed I believe he would drop dead. But everything else is hardly real to him. . . . He is like a child living in a magic world of fairies and goblins."

She laughed and called out: "Father!"

He stopped, looked round to see where he was, and came towards us.

"Eva's here!" I cried.

He pulled himself together. "Hullo, Eva!" he exclaimed with his old radiant smile, as though she had just returned from one of her visits to friends along the coast. "And who is this little boy?"

I explained that he was Eva's child.

"Oh, of course! They said they were coming one day, didn't they? And the father?" Then, thinking a moment, he added suddenly: "Oh, yes, prevented! I remember!" Taking one or two stones from his leather bag, he put them into the little boy's hand, saying they came from Basileia and that Pytheas had probably trodden on them. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Sven," replied the child.

Uncle Gosch thought he could see a likeness to the boy's uncle, and I remarked that as he was old Sven's nephew and his own grandson it was likely that other resemblances might appear in time.

This idea was evidently too complicated for Uncle Gosch, and he shook his head as he walked along with us. But I could see he was pleased to be going home with his daughter and her child, though he had evidently quite forgotten they had just crossed the Atlantic.

When on reaching home we stood in the doorway and Auntie Lena saw her daughter—a tall, mature woman, with thick, lustrous hair, experienced manner, and a child at her side—she sobbed aloud. Stroking Eva's hair and cheek as the latter knelt before her, and kissing the little boy's hand, she reached out to take my hand as well, and cried as I have never seen her cry before.

In the afternoon, when the old people and the little boy were sleeping, Eva and I went all over the house, reminding each other of the scenes of our childhood. Then, after standing by the side of the water where our boat had been moored in the old days, we strolled through the streets.

We remembered everything and everybody, and talked about Eilert, Barbara, Helmut, Ernemann, and the thousand and one experiences we had in common. But when either of us turned away, how intently we watched and scrutinized each other! We felt so near to each other, and yet so far!

That night I could not get to sleep for a long time. Hitherto I had instinctively regarded women as the weak, clinging sex, that needed guidance and protection. And the fact that Eva was my equal, and in some ways more self-reliant than I was, again set up a barrier between us. Moreover, there was the recollection of our comradeship, which always acts as an obstacle to love and paralyses it. I felt that great passion alone could help us over this barrier, as it had done in Los Angeles; and I expected difficulties.

The next morning I thought I would go to her bedroom door, as I had so often done as a boy, to ask her to be good enough to help me with my tie. But when I crept there and heard her talking to her child, and remembered she had a son, that she was my great friend and was now a self-reliant, mature woman and my equal, I felt ashamed and went back to my room.

At breakfast I was outwardly cheerful, though inwardly ill-at-ease. But when I announced that a carriage was coming to take Uhle and myself to Stormfeld, and, after a moment's reflection, she said, "I'll go with you," I was overjoyed.

At the ferryman's house, where Eva was welcomed with glad surprise, we found Uhle sitting silent at the window, gazing vacantly in front of her. I don't think I had ever seen her idle before.

I told her we wanted to take her for a drive to Stormfeld, and that it would do her good.

With an expression of timid subjection she asked me whether I was not going to take her to the police, as she and Eilert—so she thought—had set the house on fire. But I comforted her by saying I had been to the magistrate and that everything was all right.

At first she thought she ought to go to the asylum at Schleswig, and then with the same timid, inquiring look she asked: "Am I to go to the workhouse?"

I shook my head and scolded her. Did she think I was trying to deceive her and send her to the workhouse? No—I was going to show Eva my home and look up Engel Tiedje. "The poor fellow lives there all alone," I said, "without anybody to look after him; and you must come with us. It will be a change for you."

As her trunk had been saved from the fire, she went, without saying a word, to change her dress, and returned in a few minutes. And we drove away, Uhle on the seat beside the driver, who was an old acquaintance, and Eva and I behind.

On the way I had to tell Eva all about our various friends, and everything that had happened—the years of war, conditions after the war, and so on, trying to make everything clear to her after her long absence. And as I spoke loud enough for Uhle and the driver to hear he sometimes turned round and put in his word.

I was very proud and happy. Eva noticed it, and chaffed me, saying I was like an old family man already. Then, remarking there was something wrong with my tie, she put it right for me.

I told her what I had done that morning—how I had turned away from her door without daring to ask her to arrange my tie.

"But why didn't you come in?" she asked in a trembling voice, suddenly looking uneasy.

"Because of the boy," I replied carelessly.

That was one for her! . . . I thought she seemed inclined to forget the scene in Los Angeles and wanted to mother me again and do up my tie!

She was silent for a while, and avoided my eyes. I went on with my story, and took no pains to hide my light under a bushel. Yes, the old days, when I had been filled with respectful awe, were over! I had become somebody! I had become a man! And Frederick Modersohn at the other end of the world, dead and buried for three months now, could not stand in my way! No! I had starved long enough and life would not wait! My time had come, and hers too, I hoped!

As we reached the bend in the village street from which the first glimpse of the forge is obtained we saw Engel Tiedje standing in front of the large doors, in his Sunday best—a short, broad figure with long, heavy arms, and his great red handkerchief in one hand. Above his head a thin column of smoke rose from the doors and curled about the balcony, and we could hear from the blows ringing on the anvil that his assistant was at work inside.

I tried to speak to him as though we were just paying him an ordinary visit, but I noticed the beads of perspiration on his brow, and saw how disturbed he was by my companions.

When Uhle went into the forge with me she was suddenly overcome with confusion, and an insane laugh burst from her lips. "Now, Uhle, old girl," I cried, seizing her by the shoulders, "just you see to everything! I'm afraid the poor old fellow is in a bad way. Go and make us some coffee!"

She went—not, it is true, with the springy gait of yore—with faltering steps past the fire, and up the stairs into the kitchen, which she had seen for the last time while my parents were still alive.

Taking Eva's arm, I now went all over the little house with her, showing her everything; and then we went to the churchyard and the beach. I showed her the scenes of my childhood, and felt strangely calm and resolute. When I turned to her and tried to look into her eyes they were gazing at something else, and I could not do so. And yet how I longed to look into them, for my own eyes were very calm, confident, cool, and manly! We were away about two hours, and when we returned we installed ourselves at the round table near the stove, and Uhle waited on us, while Engel Tiedje smoked his pipe.

Presently he told us that he had made arrangements to move into Auntie Siene's old house, and had even taken his few belongings over there, so that my parents' home would be entirely at my disposal. "The parish authorities have no objection to your using it as you like," he added.

Turning to Uhle, I told her I intended to spend my summers in Stormfeld, and asked her whether she would care to live across the road with Engel Tiedje.

She did not dare to answer, but, trying to show her gratitude and readiness to do as I wished, she asked with a bewildered expression: "Is Eva going to be your wife?" And then laughed her mad laugh.

"It won't be easy," I replied with calm dignity. "But in a little while I shall ask her." So saying I laid my hand in Eva's. Yes, that is what I said. I actually dared to take that step. But it exhausted my courage and I did not dare to look at her.

Engel was deeply perturbed by this new development, and with his usual delicacy felt that we ought to be left alone together. So, asking Uhle to go across the road with him, to look at the house, he left us.

Once more we went all over the house, discussing possible alterations, and found it difficult to decide what to do with the forge. "We must have large windows put into this wall," I said at last, screwing up all my courage. "I am sure you and the children will like to sit here." And making a sweeping gesture, I stepped away from her, pretending I wanted to examine the wall. I did not dare to look at her. As a human being, she seemed to stand too close to me! Besides, there was that blessed friendship of our childhood years!

I was furious with myself. I did not know what might happen, and I longed for Engel and Uhle to come back. But they did not come back! We grew more silent and stiff every moment, and I expected that very soon we should be treating each other like strangers. I fancied that she was smiling. Unfortunately I could not make sure, as I could not for the life of me look at her.

So we went back into the sitting-room, and I showed her the little pictures hanging on the walls. But that did not take very long. I felt I was making a fool of myself, that I was the greatest coward that had ever lived. But I could not forget how our relationship had begun and continued! What had I been in her home? A poor little waif! And she had bent over me and bound up my finger, though there was nothing the matter with it, and had scolded me, and I had believed every word and not dared to breathe!

But at last help came. It began to get dark. What a godsend for a timid man! Though even then I did not seem able to turn it to account. Presently we went to the kitchen, where I discussed the question of a new sink. I talked a lot of rubbish, for my mind was full of the other matter, which I knew must be settled. I believe I heard her laughing. Although she must surely have been thinking of her late husband over in California, and probably too of Eilert, with whom she had been passionately in love, there she was behaving in the same old self-confident way; and in spite of the madness of the age and of our present situation was actually laughing! But I could not bring myself to look at her—impossible! And all because we were old friends!

If only she had helped me! If only she had come up to me and taken my arm, or rested her dear shoulder against me! But no! She was perfectly cool and collected—taking everything as a matter of course! She was enjoying it! She seemed to be quite ready to live there with me—oh, quite! "Yes," she agreed, "we must have a new sink. And it ought to be a little higher for a woman of my size, or I should have to bend over too much."

But still we did not come to the point, and I was at my wits' end. Standing at the window was hopeless. It was too light there. So I stepped back and stood by her near the stove.

Then my eye suddenly caught sight of my mother's old lamp—a useless, old-fashioned thing, which, however, I regarded as the heart of the house—and I begged

Eva, although it was useless, to let it remain where it was.

She consented, and in her voice I heard the kind smile which had so entranced me as a child.

I explained to her that I regarded that lamp as the symbol of the slow and steady sequence of the generations, the sign of middle-class respectability and order. As mine was a restless, adventurous, and disorderly nature, I respected peace, constancy, order, providence, daily work, and Sabbath rest. "What I require is a slow and measured pace," I said, "beauty of form and godliness. And that is why I want you. Hitherto I have not been a good citizen or husband, and I doubt whether I ever shall be. I can only promise to be faithful and a good comrade, and do my best to achieve the other ideals as well."

She squeezed my hand. "I know all that, Holler," she replied in her old matter-of-fact, hearty way. "I can see all that in your books. You are not Eilert's cousin for nothing. But remember—I have a large heart; I love the garish motley of human life too, and its rough kindly justice, and that is why we have been fond of each other ever since we were children. So I think we'll get on all right together."

Excellent! All settled! All clear! God bless my mother's old lamp! Wonderful! We were one!

But wait! Was that really so? We were still as far from each other as we had been when I had crept away from her door that morning. A gulf still yawned between us! Oh, that damnable comradeship!—that friendship which spread its cool, calm, timid wisdom over everything hot and bursting within me, and made me speak in grandfatherly tones, when it was time for daring deeds!

I was silent.

Suddenly I made an awkward movement with my hands. I did not know what on earth to do with them. And then I found I had hurt my finger. I felt angry and perhaps a little hopeful. I raised my hand and examined it. . . .

Exactly! . . .

Her voice suddenly changed and grew quite motherly and anxious. "What's the matter?" she cried.

"It looks as though I grazed my hand when I helped to unharness the horses," I replied carelessly. "You know how clumsy I am."

"Come here!" she cried, pulling me by the hand towards the window, and fumbling in her pocket for a bandage.

That did it!

"Yes," I said, "but enough of words!" And I clasped her in my arms.

"At last!" she cried. "My God, what a long business!"

Yes, that is what she said!

But after that she did not get a chance of saying much. Just once she muttered: "You're as bad as Eilert!" —which I took as a compliment. And then the old people came back.

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What more have I to tell?

My writing-table is in the room that looks out on to the village street, and across the way I can see the church and the graves of my parents. Eva wanted me to have the larger room, but I preferred this one with its view out to sea. Our children are playing in the forge, which now has a large bright window. But it still seems to smell of old iron.

Engel Tiedje, who is living with Uhle only a few doors away, is now old and shrunken and walks with a big stick, which he brings down in front of him at each step. He is the living reminder of my dear parents, and to me the most venerable of men. Whenever I meet him I always bend down; for I cannot bear to see his eyes, so full of sympathy and feeling, looking up to me, his child.

My constant fear is that the children, who are always hanging round him, may plague him. I don't want him to be worried on his lonely walks to the churchyard or the beach. But they are always with him. There they go at this moment, the two elder ones on either side, and the youngest in front, so that he can hardly find room for his big stick. He casts a quick glance up at my window, and raises his stick a little, looking proud because he is my friend and is taking the children out. Then he quickly looks away again so as not to disturb me. But the children have made him forget his pipe, and a thin streak of smoke is rising from his pocket.

Sven, the eldest, the little Yank, says he is going to be a blacksmith. He is great friends with Engel's last assistant, who now has a forge at the other end of the village. But what he likes best is to hear Engel's tales about my old friends, the South Sea Islanders. Our eldest, who is called Gesa, finds plenty to do with the little girls in the village. Strange to say, although they look so well, they always seem to be suffering from some sore or abrasion on their hands and legs and have to be bandaged up. But what she likes best of all is to bind up Engel's huge hand, and as I follow them now with my eyes I can see a gleaming white bandage on the hand that holds the big stick. I am sure she has dared him to remove it on pain of death.

Engel's favourite is our youngest, a little boy. I often see them together, and recognize in Engel's eyes the look he used to give me when I was a child. When it is raining they sit together in the little balcony my father built for me over the forge. The other day I found them there together. The youngster was hugging a curious battered old box to his breast, and when I asked him what it was he said it was for him and Engel to fly to the sky in. When he held it up for me to see I recognized the Town Hall of Lüneberg!

As for Uhle, at first I thought I had undertaken too much in being responsible for her and trying to save her from the asylum. But she gradually calmed down. She is, of course, quite derelict and feckless, but she can at least live under our care. When she cannot get her fire to light she always opens the front door and calls for help, and the people who know her weakness say: "Well, Uhle, won't it light?" and come in and help her. When we are away she comes over and looks after the place for us, and of an afternoon when we are at home she sits with her needlework at my mother's sewing-table. And I can see from her face that she is happy.

Eva's parents come over from time to time, and when we have all had our say, over coffee or any other meal, Auntie Lena takes a chair on to the doorstep, and addresses every one who comes along, whether she knows them or not. How it is I'm sure I don't know, but people always stop and come up to talk to her. Meanwhile Uncle Gosch goes over to Engel. As a rule they stroll very slowly side by side up and down the village street, and their chief topics of conversation are Pytheas and myself. As I watch them going up and down, and see my foster-father holding fast to the top button of Engel's jacket, I know what they are discussing. And when Engel stretches out his huge arm and brings it down slowly to the height of a poor helpless little boy's head, talking eagerly the while, I know what he is saying.

We have a good carriage with two spirited horses, and occasionally I invite Engel to go for a drive. He sits bent and bowed at my side, and as we go along we discuss in slow, measured tones every hut, every acre, and every face we see. I feel certain that, like me, he believes that when life on earth is behind us we shall behold things much more marvellous and sacred than the landscape and the scenes about us now. For how could anyone who has witnessed the miracles he and I have seen believe anything to be impossible?

We always drive out through Steenkarken, where we give the horses a feed and stroll through the streets. On one such occasion we witnessed an extremely distressing scene, which we could not forget for a long time. We were coming back from the heath to the town when we happened to see two old men quarrelling, surrounded by a crowd of ill-disciplined children who were howling at them. As we drew nearer we recognized, to our horror, that they were the headmaster of the grammar school and my Uncle Peter.

They must have been close on eighty, and from their wretched clothes and looks we could see they were quite uncared for. The headmaster had retained something of the fine grandfatherly appearance he had had when I was a child, but my Uncle Peter was now completely shrivelled up, and looked like a dirty old mummy come back to life. Most of the children, I gathered, belonged to my Uncle Peter, and were his wife's grandchildren, born since I had last seen him. With the same old spiteful and semi-maniacal expression which had so often frightened me the headmaster was saying: "Why weren't you at school yesterday?"

"But I was there, sir," my Uncle Peter replied in peevish, whining tones. "It was you who weren't there!" Glowering at him, as though he were a fourth-form boy, the headmaster retorted: "How dare you say I was not there? Do you take me for a lunatic? Two hours' detention for you to-day, my boy!" My uncle whined something about being hunted about at home, and not even being able to find peace in the streets. But the headmaster angrily told him not to answer back, and threatened to expel him if he did. "You are only a working man's child," he said, "and we don't put on gloves in dealing with the likes of you. . . ." Meanwhile the children were shouting at the two old men, laughing and jeering at them, and saying they were both crazy.

I have never known Engel Tiedje so sad, horrified, and silent as he was when we were driving home that day, and, in spite of all my efforts, I too was finally reduced to silence staggered by the scene we had just witnessed and the cruelty of Fate.

A few months later I heard from the Pastor of Steenkarken that my uncle was dying and was constantly asking to see me. So I set off at once, and reached his house at dusk. But it was too late—he was dead!

As it would have been sheer hypocrisy on my part to condole with his wife, I asked her whether she had any idea what he had wanted of me. She said she gathered from his ravings that it was something to do with his old mother's death. In accordance with local custom she asked me before I left whether I wished to see the body, and out of politeness I consented. She then led me through the best room, which, as far as I could see in the darkness, seemed much the same as ever, and into the room in which I had slept as a child. It was now terribly dilapidated; the paper hung in festoons, and there were great holes in the outside walls. The old armchair was still there, and in a small, light wooden coffin lay my uncle, with rats playing about his face.

I retreated in horror and, without saying a word, left the house.

We spend our winters in Ballum with the two old people, and our children play about the house as though it were their own. I try to keep them quiet, but Auntie Lena will not hear of their being made miserable under her roof. She has now relegated her various duties in the town to a somewhat masculine, energetic old maid of uncertain age, and only interferes when the latter meets with any difficulty in carrying out a good work. Then Auntie Lena rises to her full height and, with her large eyes and rich, penetrating voice, overawes every one, including the Mayor and the Dean. She loves to talk of her childhood and Wenneby, and every day we seem to get to know her father better. Her understanding of our children is wonderful, and it is particularly amusing to hear her arguing with our eldest, and saying the most dreadful things about America and Denmark, while he defends both vigorously, and finally challenges her to a boxing match.

Uncle Gosch is, of course, very fond of us and the children. But, like everything else in his environment, he takes us for granted and sees nothing wonderful about us. All his interest and admiration are reserved for that old, half-forgotten native of Greece, Pytheas, and he carries on a steady correspondence with five or six scholars all over the world, for whom this old traveller and pioneer is also the pivot of existence.

In the afternoon I go out on to the dykes, to the point where they turn, and get a full view of the sea beyond; and I linger there a good while, returning to the town feeling calmer, more serene, and with a wider outlook on life. Before reaching the ferry, at the point where the Hafenstrasse begins, I sometimes call at the broken-down, dilapidated little cottage where my Aunt Sarah plies a small trade in fish, as her grandmother did before her. She lives there with a rough old fisherman, who has the reputation of being too fond of the bottle. But he has found his master in her. Everybody says she is exactly like her grandmother, particularly in her habit of wearing some piece of old finery, such as a fur or a silk dress. What I like best is to go to her on Sundays, and see her sitting in all her glory at her table in the little low-ceilinged room, with her gold chain round her neck, surrounded by crates of fish, and her cat and dog on her bed. Her voice is loud like that of all women who have to shout in the open air in all weathers, and she inveighs against the old judge, Dutti Kohl, and the Government, describing her former wealth and prosperity and banging the table so heavily with her great work-soiled fists that the whole place seems to shake.

To comfort her I talk to her about her children, though with all due caution; for I know that ever since his quarrel with his family Eilert has sunk ever lower and lower in vice and poverty.

Once I decided to visit him in Belgium in the hope that not I but my love might help him. But I found only Bothilde at his mean lodgings in Antwerp, and when I went to the little fisherman's hut on the beach where he lived I could not get in.

I know my aunt is aware of all this; but to please her I talk to her about his fame and this and that picture he has painted. But I can see she is not interested. Then I speak of Barbara, who, directly after the war, went with Helmut to China, where he had been given a post in a German-Dutch firm. I believe she was glad to go. She had never loved her mother; her pride made her hate her mother's circumstances. Besides, she adored adventure. But when I describe to my aunt what I imagine her daughter's life in China is like, she looks coldly and critically at me, and I cannot help thinking how low her intelligence is, and marvel that a little money should once have enabled her to play her part so easily among the best people of the place.

Sometimes I call on Balle and Dina at their shop. The family is divided into two sections—the one inclined to be self-reliant, to love animals, and to be daring and untidy in their dress and the cut of their hair, and the other to indulge in an exaggerated and over-anxious love of cleanliness, which degenerates into polished skins. But let me point this out to all whom it may concern—it is not the good and the just in this world who are rewarded by having peace in their homes, but those who know how to smile. Wherever Balle is to be found, with those of his children who are like himself, there may be much noise, but there is always peace; for in victory they are chivalrous and in defeat they smile. Once when I accused him of frequenting the harbour tavern he told me to my surprise that he no longer went there, and hinted darkly that he could not now afford it. A week later I heard that he was a sidesman at the church, and I feel sure that under the influence of Dina's cleanliness, which is largely ambition, and his old leaning to the clerical profession, he will one day become a churchwarden and go to church in a top-hat. Never have I seen his eyebrow perform such antics as when I told him this; but he did not mind—on the contrary, he seemed rather elated at the prospect.

My relationship to Eva is peaceful and delightful in every way. We did not choose each other for our looks, or as the result of any ideal we had in mind, but because we knew each other's worth and had known it for ages. The important point is that we are deeply interested in all things human, which gives us ever fresh scope for our imagination, energy, and will. And, above all, neither of us wishes to convert the other to anything, or to change the other's nature; but we each do what suits us best without the other interfering, and look on with a smile if certain idiosyncrasies lead to some act of foolishness. I tell her—she disputes it, of course—that she is somewhat dictatorial, and is inclined to overreach her authority as her mother always does. And she tells me—and I do not dispute it, of course, and this constitutes the great difference between men and women—that I am inclined to neglect wife, children, property, and honour among men for the sake of my interest in other people and my frantic zeal for my work. Thus we are very different from each other, which might lead to serious trouble. Nothing of the sort, however. Far from it. It only leads to a little lively discussion at times, in which the children are beginning to join.

The children attend the Government schools in Stormfeld and Ballum, and are quite happy there. Sometimes, remembering my own unfortunate experiences, I express doubts as to the felicity of their lot, and begin to criticize the schools; but they join issue with me most violently, and say that my unfortunate experiences must have been my own fault. Evidently schools must have changed since I was a boy!

In my literary work I am very successful both at home and abroad. On the bookshelf my books may be seen in all kinds of editions, cheap and dear, and in all manner of languages. One of them has been translated into eight languages, and in my files I have congratulatory letters from the leading minds of the day. But I have had to pay for it! My life has been all work and much care. Three times have I been ignominiously criticized and humiliated before the whole of cultured Germany. Some insist on thinking me orthodox. But I am only a simple follower of the Saviour. Others say I am Prussian. But I hail from a land of free republican peasants, and when my father was born he was a subject of the King of Denmark! My interests stretch beyond my native shores. My thoughts and emotions are at once German and European. I never intended to write for Germany alone, and when I write about Germany I do so with others besides Germans in my eye. Most of my opponents, however, mean well. They think I want to destroy orthodox belief and morality. But I reply that these things are already dead, and that it is hopeless to try to revive them. That is why with other kindred souls I endeavour to set up a purer and more honest table of values.

I cannot say I am particularly happy. With my timid and sensitive nature I should have been happier as a peaceful, hard-working village schoolmaster or parson, with no thought of responsibility towards millions of readers, and without that fame which brings curses as well as blessings in its train. I am not proud of my gifts; I know they are not due to any effort on my own part. I am only proud of having kept these gifts bright and untarnished all through my life, of having preserved my individuality in spite of praise and censure, and of having always written only what my conscience bade me. And this is the only reason I have for hoping that the fancies of my brain and the creations of my art, which I trust is not commonplace, may prove enduring.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Conclusion

At times when I feel my imagination getting the better of me I leave my village to wander through the woods to the south—those woods which I saw for the first time as a child with my father, and under the shade of whose trees I rode with Hans. On reaching the village and passing by the Dean's house I follow the road I took as a child with Almut.

Her children come along to meet me, and with them walks a tall, haggard old man. It is Sören, and they are leading him because he is blind. Everybody knows he is a murderer, but no one is surprised that he should not be punished, and no one dreams of denouncing him, because God punished him and passed sentence on him long before he punished himself. And thus he wanders through the village streets, a symbol of mankind's eternal sinfulness. He recognizes me by my voice. Although he is blind he knows everything that is going on, and follows the seasons with the same interest as of old.

Then I meet Hans. How tall and thin he looks! And how large his mouth is! The whole man seems made of wood. And yet when I draw nearer, and see his eyes in their great hollow sockets, and hear his beautiful soft voice, and his kind and gentle words, I feel I honour him, after my father, more than any man on earth.

"Are you quite sure," I ask, "about Sören and your children? . . . It would be terrible. . . .!" Thus my imagination plays nasty tricks with me.

He shakes his head. "He can't sleep at night," he replies in his beautiful singsong voice. "If he were to hurt anyone it would be himself. I often say to him: 'Sören, you were not the man for that sort of thing, that's why you cannot bear it. You were bewitched by her, by her smooth white face.' But he shakes his head. He doesn't believe in witches, but in his own sin."

On reaching the old farm in the wood I see Almut at the door waiting to welcome me. She is still something of a child, with all the child's cheerful friendliness. Locking her arm in mine, she sits close up to me, and asks after Eva, the children, and my latest work. She is still proud of being my oldest friend and of having thought I would be somebody one day, even when I was only six years old. She is not very strong, nor completely adult. In talking to her one has to use bright and pleasing colours, as it were. She has to lead a life protected from the world's shadows. And so I distort and exaggerate things a little, emphasizing the cheerful side, and behaving generally as I did when I was six years old. And she smiles and stares and calls her husband, in the same tender way, on two notes, and looks up at him adoringly.

Another day I go to Hamburg, and ask for news of Helmut at certain shipping offices, and call on friends. I walk through the Exchange, not because I understand such matters, but because I want to gauge the atmosphere. Or I go to the harbour, and call on various old friends on board ship. And I try to be all things to all men, without letting anyone read anything from my face. What would happen to me if I did? What surprises there would be! And what quarrels! Oh, I am a regular old Low Saxon, and have my secret pleasures!

The next day I walk over to Övelgönne, and find my mother-in-law sitting by the window in her poorly furnished sitting-room, while opposite her sits her granddaughter, her eldest son's child, still delicate and frail-looking. They are both busy making lace.

She complains that post-war life is rather hard, and in answer to a question from me admits that the bank-book is still inclined to give trouble.

As for her sons, she tells me that they too are suffering from the times. They have given up business on a grand scale and dealing in goods which, as far as she understood, never existed; and the two eldest are now in offices. Their salaries are low at present, but they hope to get promotion —not that they ever boast about such things, for, as I must surely know, her children never boast; but she gathers all this from their conversation.

Apparently Adalbert did not want to return to his post with the Mayor of Hamburg. "It was such a heavy responsibility, and then he found those eternal secrets which he had to keep to himself when everybody wanted to hear them so very irksome. So he preferred to be a clerk in a small business man's office."

As for Eusebius, he is in New York, and writes such cheerful letters to his old mother. "You know," she explains, "that he learnt Chinese in the hope of one day being asked to join his uncle? Well, this language, which is spoken by so many millions of people, is hardly spoken at all in New York. But you know how courageous my children are . . . although Gesa and Thomas, the two dear departed, were different. . . . But, to cut a long story short, Eusebius is at present a washer-up in a large hotel, working all on his own, and no languages are needed for that job."

Once when I asked her about her brother in India she told me that she had heard from a certain ship's captain that he was dead, but that his sons were very comfortably off, and would soon come over to see their old aunt. "And then, dear Holler," she added, with that old soft look in her brown eyes, "things will be very different here!"

All this time the little girl, whom I had been watching, had been listening with the deepest sympathy to her grandmother, and I noticed that she had the old lady's brown eyes.

Soon after this, while I was away on a short visit to Austria, I heard that my father-in-law had died after a brief illness. When I next called on my mother-in-law, and inquired how she was getting on, she replied that she was doing very well—she had a little pension—and that the bank-book was in good order, and she was convinced would remain so. But for her grief at her husband's death, I found her in very good spirits—not to say jubilant; for she understood that her nephews in farthest Ind had hitherto failed to communicate with her only because they bore some grudge against her husband, but that now this last obstacle had been removed.

I never forget when I am in Hamburg to call on Paul

Sooth, nor will the reader be surprised to hear that he is finding these post-war times very harassing. He is constantly seeing danger threatening himself and his family, and there are days when his hat is pulled so low over his eyes that I marvel how he finds his way to his office.

I always inquire after his brothers and sisters, for I know they constitute his favourite topic of conversation; and then he takes the papers dealing with each one of them out of his pocket, and shows me the photograph of the brother who was killed in the war, and I fancy I can see a strange gleam in his eyes. All his brothers and sisters, like himself, are good citizens, well qualified to live clean lives in modest circumstances. On Sundays they usually have big family gatherings, over which Clara presides. She is still inclined to laugh on the slightest provocation, but as she grows older, and except when I remind her of old times, these explosions are less violent, and her laughter tends to concentrate more and more about her eyes, and to show itself in a humorous attitude to things in general.

Then I return home, eager for sleep, solitude, and peace, and spend the first day pottering about the garden, arranging papers, and retailing my experiences, before resuming work.

Once when I was in Hamburg walking along the Steinstrasse in the twilight I happened to see on the other side of the road, standing in front of one of the narrow alleys leading to dark courts behind, a fine tall woman. But as I was deep in thought I paid no particular attention to her and passed on. Then suddenly I happened to think of Eilert and his friend Bothilde, and remembered that for the last ten years things had gone more quietly with them. This had been due partly to his contempt for his fellow-men, whom he kept at arm's length, and partly, so I had heard, because he was falling ever more and more a prey to his vices. It was probably also due to the fact that the defeat of Germany had led, more especially among refined and cultivated people, to a disbelief in moral or even eternal spiritual values, and was thus accountable for much of the despair and decadence that prevailed.

With my mind full of Eilert, and with his image before my eyes, I went up the street and made a purchase for Eva, returning as I usually did on the other side. As I did so

I again saw the tall, stately, elderly woman, bareheaded and poorly clad, still standing at the entrance to the alley. Suddenly she turned round and was on the point of going back along the dark passage, when I recognized her. . . . It was Bothilde! . . . Hence my thoughts of her and Eilert!

I ran after her, calling her name, and, turning round, she recognized me. She seemed to be taken aback, but soon recovered her composure, and said coldly, almost absent-mindedly: "Hullo! Did my brother tell you we were here? I told him not to tell anybody."

I assured her that Balle had said nothing, that I had caught sight of her quite by accident, and asked her whether Eilert was with her.

She made no reply, but walked along by my side with bowed head. After we had gone about a hundred yards past some dilapidated houses we reached a door, which she opened.

The first room we entered, which was poorly furnished, was a hall and kitchen combined, but the large low-ceilinged room behind, with its two windows, was comfortably arranged. It had two tables, an easel, a stove, three or four chairs, and a large bed. The furniture was old and looked valuable.

Without saying a word we sat down by the stove, and I gazed at her as she sat silently before me. Her figure was still youthful, and her sensual mouth still revealed a fine set of teeth; but her face was deeply lined, her hair was turning grey, and her eyes had that moist, feverish expression of care and reproach which spoke of want, suffering, and tears. Her well-shaped, work-soiled hands were in her lap; but all at once she laid them on the table and said: "He has been brooding too much, brooding madly . . . always about the same thing . . . his house, and that he can never go back there . . . and about humanity . . . he wants to see men more natural and more beautiful . . . and he is drinking too much. And one day he broke down . . . a stroke. For three days he lay like dead. I thought at first of writing to you, because you stand for his native land, but he always said you were a coward."

"What did he mean by that?" I exclaimed sharply.

She was a simple-minded creature, but she tried to explain. "He says that in your heart of hearts you are as natural, wild, and revolutionary as he is, but that you are cautious, and consider Eva's feelings and the practical concerns of life."

"Tell him, Bothilde, that we differ in two respects," I replied angrily. "In the first place his maternal ancestors were murderers, whereas mine were peaceful country folk, and in the second he was the child of rich parents and enjoyed life as a boy, while I was a penniless orphan, exposed to ignorance and every kind of hardship. Thus he acquired a taste for luxury and became defiant and took to drink, whilst I, with my milder blood, and my memories of my parents, and the poverty and hardships of my childhood, grew up more sceptical, more cautious, and more thoughtful; and so, in spite of all the dangers to which my nature exposed me, I succeeded in becoming the peaceable, honourable, and law-abiding citizen I am to-day."

She gazed at me for some time, and from her expression, which was strange to me and which she had acquired from her long association with him, I could see how suspicious she had become. "I always stood up for you," she observed at last in more friendly tones, "for haven't I known you ever since you were a child? Weren't you my little farm boy?"

She then explained that as she had not been allowed to write to me she had written to Balle, who came at once and tried to persuade Eilert to go back to Ballum; but he had refused. Eventually he had decided to come here, and Balle had found these rooms for them, and hoped ultimately to get him back to Ballum, where she was sure he would find rest—as far as that was possible—and die in peace. "He has always burnt his candle at both ends," she added, "and now he is done for. He is broken in mind and body, and has not long to live. He knows it." And the tears coursed down her cheeks.

He was out at the moment. She had persuaded him to go and enjoy the sunshine, and she had been looking out for him. "I don't know what he will say," she exclaimed anxiously, "or what will happen if he finds you here!"

I got up and took her hand. "Try to repeat what I have told you," I said, "and tell him how I long for our old friendship again." After asking whether she was in need of money and ascertaining that she was not, I left.

Going up the street again, I looked out for him, and after a while I saw him walking on the opposite side. There was something worldly about his appearance which was new to me, and possibly due to the fact that he was now mature and certainly old before his time. His large face had degenerated and become distorted and lined; his clothes hung loosely about him, and his boots were old. He was walking with his hat in his hand, and had obviously been drinking. People moved out of his way as he came along and looked hard at him. Some smiled contemptuously, while others turned round and looked sad. His hair had receded from his temples and revealed the fine lofty brow which was the index to the nobility and breadth of his soul. He was muttering to himself and making proud, majestic gestures with his energetic hands. I shall never forget the sight.

When I had been in Hamburg three days I heard from Bothilde that he would like to see me, and I hurried to him at once.

Bothilde met me in the kitchen and told me that he had got drunk again and was in a very weak state. I gathered from her manner that the end was near. She led me into the room. He was sitting in a large armchair near the stove, in front of his last picture, in a state of collapse, and was asleep. When I sat down Bothilde placed picture after picture before me, and as fast as I looked at them she put them away. They were all the outcome of a vital, almost mad imagination, the products of a sovereign mind gone to seed. The last one, which was on the easel, represented his arrival in heaven. It was grotesquely arrogant, and full of that overbearing spirit so common among our people. It was ridiculously, blasphemously mad! It was enough to make one weep. Nevertheless it was full of a deep and genuine sense of life, and was not so very far removed from my own spirit.

Presently he woke up, and gazed at me for some time with dim, weary eyes. Then, recognizing me, he gave me a feeble handshake, saying he was very weak and ill.

Bothilde comforted him, telling him he would be better soon. Now that the summer was back again they would be able to go out together.

"The mother is singing the old, old human song to her child!" he said softly, looking up at me again.

Then his great head fell forward, his eyes closed, and he muttered to himself, half asleep, recalling various incidents in his life. He spoke of Uhle, Dieter Blank, God, his unhappy marriage in Amsterdam, and his attempt to live like a respectable citizen. Laboriously but calmly and with a certain serenity, he seemed to be reviewing his past life; and we sat and listened.

We sat up half the night watching his slumbers. Once he woke up and was lucid, saying he was on the eve of solving the riddle—he meant the riddle of life. Then a little later he said: "He must give me a good post, little ensign, a post in the forefront."

A doctor came in once, and also a woman neighbour; but the rest of the time we were alone. We were also alone with him when he died the following morning, in the middle of a storm of rain. Three days later I brought him home and buried him in the old churchyard of Stormfeld. Then I returned to my work, and became so absorbed in it that time, my family, and my property seemed to slip away from me and be lost in the mist. Reality became a dream, and my dream became reality.

But hark! I hear them coming to my room, those old, dear old feet! I hear them shuffling along the passage, and at every weary step I hear the big stick tap the tiles. It is dusk.

I get up and go to meet him; he is breathing heavily, and I lead him to a comfortable chair by the window, near the sewing-table at which my mother used to sit. He settles himself down with difficulty; he is now very short and squat and his large grey head is sunk low between his mighty shoulders.

I can see that he has something particular to say, and I give him time. The walk has been an effort and he cannot speak. He is already a little bit absent-minded, and far removed from earth and earthly things.

Silent and concentrated on his aim, he tries hard to find something in his capacious pocket. I too have said nothing.

At last he produces a little object, wrapped in a piece of yellow newspaper, and handing it to me says with an effort: "Otto, my boy, things are drawing to an end with me, so I want to give this back to you. I can't trust Uhle."

I unwrap the paper, still ignorant of what it contains.

At last I know! It is the old coin which Councillor Mumm sent me on my birthday. As a child I had put it into Auntie Lena's hand when I stood begging for help at her door, and later on I had returned it to Engel to keep for me. All these years I had been under the impression that he had disposed of it in a moment of stress. Laying it in front of me on the dark polished table, I sit down opposite him.

And thus we sit in the twilight, as he and my father had sat forty years ago while my dear mother and I were sleeping; and we gaze at the gold piece.

In the fitful light of the stars the small dark polished surface looks like a great broad sheet of water, like the sea at night. And in the middle of it, like a round golden islet, glistening in peaceful mystery, lies the coin.

God alone knows what thoughts are passing through our minds as we sit silently there. But one thing I do know—we do not value the gold as money, happiness, or display, but as the symbol of the eternal secret towards which all mankind is moving, and towards which we too are on our way!

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the anvil

by

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